



GAYLA TWIST

Call of the Vampire

The Vanderlind Castle Series: Book 1

Call of the Vampire
by
By Gayla Twist

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This book is dedicated to:
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Chapter 1

“As soon as we’re out of here, that’s it,” I hissed at my friend. “I’m never going along with one of your stupid ideas again.”

“You always say that, Aurora.” Blossom chuckled quietly as we inched along. “But I’m sure I can get you to go on another one. In fact, I bet you I can.”

I huffed a little but decided not to argue, given our precarious position. I didn’t want to fall just because I was annoyed with her. “Just keep moving,” I growled.

Vanderlind Castle was having a party. Not just a regular party, more like an old fashioned ball with men wearing tuxedos and ladies in gossamer evening gowns. No one I knew was invited. In fact, no one in the whole town of Tiburon, Ohio, seemed to be invited. Not even the mayor. We only knew about it because of the immense orders that had been placed at the local florist and the feast that had been requested from Blossom’s mother’s catering company, Belle Soiree. The food had been picked up by servants of the castle, so even Mrs. Coster hadn’t had so much as a peek through the front door of the massive mansion—something her daughter and I were both hoping for.

Most of the guests arrived by water. Blossom and I had been sitting alongside the Tiburon River when we saw the first boats drift past. The decks were filled with elegant ladies and gentlemen, twinkling in the twilight with their diamonds and finery, talking quietly, and sipping red wine from crystal goblets. It was like something out of a dream. More specifically, it was like something out of one of my dreams. I lived with my mom in a drab little house, but when I slept, my dreams were frequently filled with grandeur.

We walked along the river bank and out onto the public pier to watch the boats dock at the Vanderlind Castle.

Servants wearing a deep purple livery and white gloves helped the guests disembark. That's when Blossom said, "We should sneak in."

"Yeah, right," I replied. "We'd stand out like two zits on Gwyneth Paltrow's forehead."

Blossom laughed. "I mean, we'd dress up first."

"And how are we supposed to sneak in? Run across the lawn in our heels while carrying a ladder?"

"No." Blossom set her jaw. "We'll wait until all the guests have arrived, then we'll climb from boat to boat. If we keep low and inch along the outside, nobody will see us. And besides, they'll expect party crashers to come through the front door, not from the dock."

I had always wanted to see the inside of the castle. Literally, always. Ever since I could remember. I didn't know what it was about that building, but it seemed so romantic to me even though, compared to some of the photos I'd seen of castles in Austria and Germany, it wasn't very pretty. It was a huge fortress of gray stone, and there were four turrets, one at each corner. It didn't have many windows, just those small chinks in the stone that were supposedly for archers to use when the castle was under siege. There was an enormous arched door in front, but the Vanderlinds never had it open. They'd had a normal-sized door installed within the large wood one.

"Do you really think we could get in?" I asked, laying the palm of my hand to my cheek.

Blossom mirrored the gesture to mimic me, laying her hand on her own cheek. She hated when I did that with my hand—said it was too goodie-goodie. She was doing her best to break me of the habit through mockery. "Yeah, Aurora, I really do."

It wasn't a bad plan. As the guests entered the castle, their boats were moored along the shore, forming a long chain. As more boats arrived, they were tied to the first. They began to stack up three or four boats deep, making a

veritable flotilla. There were so many yachts, several of which were quite large, that a few of the boat chains reached the public pier. All we had to do was climb on one at the very edge then inch along the outside, clinging to the rail, transferring from boat to boat until we were able to just walk into the castle from the Vanderlinds' dock.

I had been going along with Blossom's harebrained schemes ever since Mrs. Lehman's third grade class. Blossom had gotten me into more trouble than I cared to remember, but as my mother always said, "You're the one that goes along with her ideas. If you're going to be friends with her, you have to learn how to tell her no." The thing was, I didn't want to say no. Not usually. Or at least, I never thought to say no until it was too late. But this idea in particular appealed to me. Even if we got caught, we'd at least get a glimpse of the inside of the castle before they kicked us out. I knew I'd probably end up regretting it, but at that moment, I really wanted to give it a try. "Let's do it," I told her.

We hopped in my ancient gold VW bug and headed back to Blossom's house to get dolled up. Because of her catering business, Mrs. Coster attended a lot of events where she had to look nice, so she had a bunch of fancy clothes. Blossom said, "I'm sure my mom won't mind if we borrow a few things."

I knew from experience that really meant, "My mom won't mind as long as she doesn't find out."

"Where is your mom?" I asked as Blossom unlocked the front door to let us in.

"Who knows?" She rolled her eyes. "Probably out on a date with her new boyfriend. I'm sure I won't see her until tomorrow morning, when she'll try to sneak in the house like she's actually been home all night."

Mrs. Coster's closet was almost as big as my room at home. There were enough shoes to keep a dozen debutants happy for months and gowns in every color. "She's a bit of a

shopaholic,” Blossom explained as she pawed through the dresses.

Blossom was the prettiest girl in our high school. Or at least, the prettiest by high-school-boy ratings. She was five foot four, blonde and blue eyed, with a cupid’s-bow mouth and a quick laugh for any joke, just as long as it was made by some jock or a guy that was viewed by the general female population of Tiburon High as being desirable. When she was around boys, she acted like a complete bubble head, and that behavior kept her in dates whenever she wanted them. But away from guys, she was daring, sarcastic, willing to laugh only if you made a very good joke or if she was mocking you. She had a split personality—part cheerleader and part Oscar Wilde.

I, on the other hand, was the kind of girl who boys probably wouldn’t appreciate until college. At least that’s what my mom always told me when I was sitting home, dateless and feeling like a loser, on a Friday night. I had black curly hair that tended to frizz, green eyes, and a bit of a pointed nose. My shape was what used to be called an hourglass figure: all boobs and buns, with very little tummy. If Marilyn Monroe’s figure were still in vogue, I’d probably have had more dates, but as it was, I had trouble finding a wardrobe that could accommodate my curves. My shape was not in style.

“Here, this’ll look great on you.” Blossom yanked an emerald green wrap gown off its hanger and tossed it to me. “It’ll bring out your eyes.” She selected a sky blue shift for herself with the same purpose in mind. Blossom might have been the same size six as her mother, but I was a good few dress sizes larger than that. The wrap dress barely hugged all my curves, and my boobs were practically popping out from the low-cut neckline.

“I can’t wear this,” I said, pulling at the material, trying to get more coverage.

Blossom cocked an eyebrow as she appraised my cleavage. "We'll borrow one of my mom's brooches to keep you in there," she assured me.

By the time we applied makeup, shoes, and accessories, we looked pretty good. I'm not sure we were elegant-ball-at-a-castle good, though. Probably more like high-school-prom good. "Are we seriously going to do this?" I asked while experimenting walking in heels that were much higher than I was used to and a size too small.

"Why not?" Blossom tossed a blonde curl over her shoulder and gathered up another bunch of hair for its turn around the curling iron.

"What if we get caught?"

"We'll just tell them my mom sent us over to make sure everything was satisfactory. I mean, who's going to questions us? Maybe a couple of servants or something. I'll just flash my mom's business card, and I'm sure everything will be fine."

And that was how it always went. Blossom's schemes always seemed so plausible. They sounded so flawless when we were sitting in her bedroom or at a cafe somewhere hatching the plan, but things looked a lot different when you were barefoot, going hand-over-hand from yacht to yacht with a borrowed pair of strappy sandals dangling off your wrist.

The thing I learned about a bunch of yachts moored together was that even the gentlest ripple made them all bob and bump each other. I seriously did not want to lose my grip and plunge between the boats. I was not that strong of a swimmer, and I didn't want to get squashed. But as we got closer to the castle, I became more and more determined. This was probably the only chance I'd have in my life to see it. I was almost desperate to get inside.

Vanderlind Castle was actually a real European castle that some crazy rich ancestor had shipped to America stone by stone about a hundred years ago when the Vanderlinds

first moved to Tiburon. There was no moat, but there was a traditional English rose garden and there were rumors of a dungeon. Whether there actually was a dungeon was left to speculation because the Vanderlinds weren't very social. If they left their home at all, it was usually by an old fashioned stretch limousine with tinted windows. The castle had a huge iron gate around the property, and accessing it by the Tiburon River was discouraged by the lack of a dock. Unless the family was expecting company, then a portable one was affixed to the back of the building.

Once a year, the Vanderlinds had a garden party in the rose garden for the locals. Tea and finger sandwiches were served, and there was usually a string quartet playing something classical. What there usually wasn't a lot of was Vanderlinds. And there was absolutely no access to the castle itself. Port-o-potties were rented for the occasion. Still, it was a friendly gesture from a wealthy family that apparently just wanted to be left alone.

That was why the ball being thrown at the castle was discussed in Tiburon so avidly. No one was invited, and everyone was dying to go. It also came as a surprise that the reclusive Vanderlinds had so many friends. Mrs. Coster took on extra staff to get the food ready for the event. There wasn't to be a formal, sit-down dinner, but she estimated the guest list to be at least two hundred.

Finally, after what seemed like a good thirty minutes of clinging to bobbing boats by my fingernails, we gained footing on a yacht that was moored next to the back patio. We hastily slipped on our shoes, and then we were able to step onto solid land. Or more accurately, the castle's back patio, which was so crowded with people that no one seemed to notice our arrival.

Quickly, I snatched two empty champagne coupes off a table and handed one to Blossom. She made a face and tried to hand it back to me. "I don't want someone's used drink."

I smiled at her through clenched teeth and said, "They're our drinks, and we've just finished them." For someone so scheming, she could sometimes be a little dense.

"That's right." She caught on immediately, lifting her chin to signal a waiter with a full tray of drinks. "Thank you," she said, beaming at him as she picked up another coupe of champagne.

"You're friends of?" the waiter asked with a slight bow. He was also dressed in the purple so dark it was almost black.

Blossom coughed a little as she sipped at the bubbly. "The Vanderlinds, of course," she said, trying to cover.

"Madame Vanderlind?" he pressed. He had a weird accent I couldn't place.

"No, the son," I interjected before Blossom could reply.

"Very good." The waiter clicked his heels together, bowing a bit lower and executing a sharp spin that had the tails of his uniform jacket flying before he continued to attend the beverage needs of the real guests.

"Where did that answer come from?" Blossom asked, slumping slightly with relief.

"Look." I nodded toward the castle. Through a large wall of glass, we could view the interior of the room that was accessed from the patio. It was an obvious modification from the original castle, but it provided the family with an excellent view of the river. In the vast room, there was a receiving line with all sorts of swanks waiting to pay their respects to a dark-haired boy who looked to be about seventeen. To his right and left were a slightly older man and woman, who appeared to be in their early twenties. Probably all siblings, I figured. They were in front of a large gift table piled high with ornately wrapped presents. "I think it's one of the Vanderlind's birthdays," I whispered.

Blossom squinted through the crowd. "Aurora, it's him," she gasped. "It's my dreamboat."

Two weeks earlier, we had been at the library on a Thursday night, the one night a week it stays open past six.

Blossom was supposed to have bought a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* for English class, but had spent the money on makeup. She was hoping against hope that the library's copy hadn't been checked out. We were trying to make heads or tails of the Dewey Decimal System when we stumbled across the world's hottest guy browsing in the classics—ruffled dark hair, skin as pale as porcelain, full lips, and gray eyes as bottomless as the Loch Ness. We were both staring at him so hard as he flipped through a copy of *The Great Gatsby* that Blossom literally walked into the back of me. “Who the hell is that?” she whispered, although probably loud enough that he could hear.

There was something about his appearance that tugged at my memory. Something my great grandmother had said from her wheelchair at the old age home during one of her clearer visions into dementia. “Their eyes. So gray. So lost. They all have gray eyes,” she'd said, clutching my hand. “I tell you, Lettie. Every single one of them has eyes as gray as the North Sea.” Lettie was her younger sister, the beauty of the family, who ran away from home as a teenager and was never heard from again. I was supposed to look a bit like her, just without the beauty part. My great grandmother, along with her sister, had worked as a maid at the Vanderlind Castle for a short time when she was young. Of course, that was before the Vanderlind family cut themselves off from the world. Granny left the post abruptly right after Lettie ran away, and she would rarely talk about her time there until her senility set in. And then, for some reason, it became a source of fixation.

“I think he's a Vanderlind,” I'd said quietly, tugging Blossom away by the arm.

“Really?” She whipped her head around to check him out in greater detail, but he was gone.

For the next couple of days, Blossom mentioned the handsome Vanderlind boy about every twenty minutes, calling him her “dreamboat” and wondering how she could

run into him again. He was remarkably good looking in that chiseled marble statue sort of way. Fortunately, a few days later, one of the best players on the varsity football team started calling Blossom to chat. Football season had just started, but the team was doing reasonably well, so she refocused her energies and let the whole dreamboat thing drop.

"We should go say hi." Blossom gripped my hand with the intent of dragging me over to the receiving line.

"Are you nuts?" I hissed at her. "That's the last place we need to be. Forget about Dreamboat. We need to work on blending in."

Even as the words left my mouth, I felt the handsome book-lover's eyes tick in my direction. He stared at me. I stared back. I wanted to look away. I knew I was being indiscreet, but he was just so handsome. It was like gazing at an old photograph of a silent film star. The older brother noticed our connection. He leaned to one side and whispered something to the young woman on his left. Her eyes quickly found me in the crowd. "Not good," I mumbled to myself. "Come on," I said to Blossom. I didn't have time to explain what was happening, so instead I said, "I need to find the ladies room."

Say what you will about Blossom, she may have been boy crazy and as changeable as the weather in March, but she was a loyal friend. Announcing a need to use the ladies could not be ignored, no matter how many attractive men were floating around the room.

My heart was pounding in my chest like the beat of some rave song at a hip club in New York as we made our way across the large room in the direction of what I hoped was some sort of bathroom facility. I was alarmed, but getting caught wasn't really the thing that had me in a panic. I hadn't said anything to Blossom when we saw him in the library, but right as I was pulling her away, the gorgeous junior Vanderlind had looked up and made direct eye

contact with me. I don't know what it was about the guy, but when our eyes met, I felt something in my body twang like there was a harp string running through me and someone had plucked it.

Seeing him again, when his eyes met mine, I felt that same tingling vibration. It was exhilarating and painful and made me excessively nervous all at the same time. I was not the kind of girl who believed in soul mates or love at first sight or any of that nonsense, but there was something about the boy that made me yearn in a way that I couldn't explain. I took a large gulp of my champagne and tried to calm down.

The room we were standing in was probably called the great hall or something like that. It was enormous, after all. So big, in fact, it couldn't be illuminated by just one giant crystal chandelier. There were actually two chandeliers, and they were both the size of a NASA reentry capsule returning a crew of astronauts to earth. I had always pictured the inside of Vanderlind Castle as dark and as gray as the stones that formed its exterior, but that was not the case. The interior walls were made of bricks that were a pale sand color with flecks of gold. I had to assume that wasn't part of the original castle. Nor was the electricity or the large glass wall with sliding doors that led onto the patio and the river. But who could blame them for wanting to modernize?

Blossom finished her glass of champagne and signaled another waiter. "Slow down," I told her in a low voice. "Don't get too crazy."

"Why not?" she shrugged. "I thought you said you had to use the ladies."

"I do. I'm just not sure where it is," I replied, which was a half-truth.

A waiter approached us, his tray filled with goblets of red wine. When Blossom extended her empty coupe glass toward him, he took a half step backwards and said, "You don't want this, I'm sure. Better stick to the champagne."

"That was rude," Blossom said as the waiter turned to serve other guests.

"He's probably right. Does red wine even taste good after champagne?" I wondered, placing my hand to my cheek.

Blossom gave me an annoyed look, glancing meaningfully at my hand until I lowered it. "Let's mingle," she said, scoring a glass of bubbly off another waiter as he went by. I'd lost track of how many glasses she'd already drunk.

The party guests were all dressed very elegantly. Mrs. Coster's gowns were nice, but mere rags compared to the elaborate finery most of the people were wearing. The men were all in tuxedos, many of them cut in the old style. There were boutonnieres, pocket squares, several top hats, and a few men even carrying walking canes. The women were dripping with jewels and clad in gowns that seemed to move like rippling water. The whole scene reminded me of the song *Puttin' on the Ritz*. It was like we'd snuck onto the set of a high budget movie.

"Is it you?" a low voice said very close to my ear, practically making me leap out of my skin. "Colette?"

I gave a startled gasp and jumped back an inch, nearly spilling my champagne. It was him. The beautiful boy from the library. And he was peering into my face with such a serious, penetrating look that it made my heart skip a beat.

"Happy birthday!" I blurted, raising my glass of champagne and hoping it wasn't actually a graduation party or something like that.

"It is you," he said, stepping even closer, his cheeks flushing with happiness. A smile broke across his face that made his eyes twinkle. "I knew it. I knew you'd come back to me," he said, sweeping me up in his arms and crushing me to his chest.

Chapter 2

My world was spinning. I knew this boy had the wrong idea and had mistaken me for someone else, but for that frozen moment in time, I didn't care. I just wanted to be in his arms, feeling the strength of them as they lifted me from the floor as if I was as light as a doll.

"Easy there, Tiger," Blossom said, tugging on the guy's shoulder until he set me gently down. "I'm Blossom, by the way. And this is Aurora."

He frowned, taking a half step back to look me over more closely. "Aurora?"

"Yeah, her mom's nice, but she's got a bit of that stink of hippie," Blossom said, making me want to strangle her. She had a lot of room to talk with a name like Blossom.

"I'm sorry," he said to me, his face returning to a look of brooding. "For a moment there, I thought... The way you..." he vaguely gestured with his hand toward my face. "Sorry, I mistook you for somebody else."

"That's okay," I said. "I wish I was somebody else."

This made him laugh. Just a short breath of laugh with bitterness behind it. Then remembering his manners, he said, "My name is Jessie Vanderlind." He searched my eyes for a moment before adding, "I apologize. I guess we don't know each other after all."

"Don't apologize," I said. "We're the ones who should be apologizing to you."

That's when Blossom gave me a little pinch and said between gritted teeth, "Shut up, Aurora."

Ignoring her, I continued. "We weren't actually invited. I'm afraid we snuck in, and I'm sorry. We just wanted to see what it was like in your beautiful home. It was really rude of us." He just kept staring at me with his fathomless gray

eyes, so I added, "We can leave now, there's no reason to call security or anything."

"You must leave," he said in a low, urgent voice as if he was afraid of being overheard. "Immediately. Come." He extended his hand toward me. "I'll find a way to get you out."

He grabbed me by the hand and was turning to lead us somewhere when his movements were blocked by the man he'd been standing next to in the receiving line. "Don't hurry your friends away so soon, Jessie," the guy said. "Introduce us."

"The girls were just leaving, Daniel," Jessie replied in a tight voice.

"Nonsense, they should stay," the older guy said, beaming. "What's a party without a few gate crashers?"

The newcomer looked a lot like Jessie in the way that brothers can. They were about the same height and had the same dark, silky hair, but where Jessie was full lipped and handsome, Daniel had a sharp face and thin lips. I guess he would have been considered handsome by most people, but he didn't have a kind face. He looked a bit too much like a hungry hawk for me to feel at ease.

"No, that's all right," I said, blushing. I was feeling so embarrassed, I wished there was a moat so I could jump into it. "We should go."

"I insist," the young man said. Then, giving his brother a very steady look, he added, "I really think leaving now would be a mistake. Don't you, Jessie?"

"Please stay and enjoy yourselves," Jessie said, giving me a thin smile before releasing my hand. His hands were cool against mine, but there was a lingering tingling with heat behind it from where he'd touched my skin.

"She's not Colette," Daniel said in a harsh whisper as the two of them walked off.

"I know, but that doesn't mean..."

Daniel cut his brother off with, "They're here now. You need to let it go."

"He. Is. Gorgeous." Blossom sighed, downing the contents of her coupe glass and eyeing the departing Jessie.

"We should leave," I whispered, blinking rapidly.

"Don't be stupid," she told me. "Now that we're officially invited and everything, we should definitely enjoy ourselves."

I just stood there, unable to move. My heart was racing, and for some reason, I had the sudden impulse to cry.

"Aurora?" Blossom goosed me in the side.

"What?" I broke out of my reverie, forcing back my tears.

"I said we should enjoy ourselves. Let's get more champagne."

I don't know what it is about an open bar, but it makes people go a little crazy. The crowd that had been so elegant and reserved when the party started was growing increasingly noisy and boisterous. Blossom was swilling down champagne like it was water. I, on the other hand, decided to stop drinking. I wasn't all that interested in getting drunk, even when I was at a party where I knew lots of people. Getting smashed in a room full of strangers didn't sound like a bright thing to do.

"Hello, beautiful girls." A handsome man somewhere in his thirties approached us. He was dressed impeccably, with a purple flower in the lapel of his jacket. His blond hair was slicked back like Errol Flynn's. "You're drinking champagne, I see." He was casually holding a goblet of red wine. His words had the hint of a European accent, like a lot of the guests at the party.

"You bet we are." Blossom clinked her glass against his. "Cheers! This is such an awesome party!" She polished off her drink and then scanned the room for a waiter.

"Your glass is empty," he observed. "Let me get you another one."

"No, thank you," I said. "I think we've had enough." I knew I sounded uptight, but I didn't like the way the guy was leering at Blossom like she was a big slice of cake.

"One more won't kill you," he said, waving away my rejection and laughing a little to himself. "Oh, I just don't see a waiter right now. Too bad."

"Loosen up," Blossom growled at me. "It's a party."

"You should take your friend's advice," the stranger told me. "Who are you two here with, by the way?"

"Jessie invited us," Blossom slurred.

"Well, Jessie has good taste." He leaned in, confidentially, "Are you his particular friends?"

"Not really," Blossom snorted. "We really only just met."

"How delightful," he said, his lips curling into a closed-mouth smile, making his already handsome face even more attractive but also a bit sleek like a snake. "I would very much like to get to know you better. But first, let me see if I can get you more champagne."

"He's so cute," Blossom said in a loud whisper, leaning on me slightly as our new friend disappeared in the crowd. "There are so many hot guys here."

"I don't know. There's something kind of creepy about him," was my assessment.

"Yeah, I hate good-looking men that flirt with me and bring me alcohol," she sneered.

But something wasn't right. I mean, we were both obviously in high school. Guys in their thirties don't get teenage girls alcohol unless they're looking to lower the girls' inhibitions. My mom was a therapist, and she specialized in helping girls who had been through trauma. The nature of her job, along with my friendship with someone as reckless as Blossom, made Mom a little paranoid. She'd been schooling me on how to take care of myself since I could remember. One very important lesson she'd tried to teach me many times over was never let a stranger get you a drink, even if it's just a coke.

“Here you are,” the debonair man said, returning with two glasses of champagne, even though I’d said I didn’t want one, and another goblet of wine for himself.

Blossom took her coupe eagerly, but I said, “No, thank you.”

“Oh, come on,” he insisted, pushing the drink toward me so that I either had to take it or let it spill on my gown. “Live a little.”

“Here’s to enjoying life,” the man said, lifting his glass of red wine in the air while looking Blossom square in the eyes. I raised my glass as well and pretended to take a sip, but never actually put my lips on the rim.

“What’s your name?” Blossom asked, once she had drunk.

“You may call me Viktor.” The man smiled at Blossom over his goblet. You could tell by the way he pronounced his name that he definitely spelled it with a K.

It was only a matter of minutes until Blossom became even more wobbly than before we had met the stranger. “Are you okay?” I asked, taking her glass away from her and setting it on a table. I knew she was feeling pretty out of it when she didn’t protest.

“I could use a drink of water,” she mumbled.

“I’ll get it for her,” Viktor eagerly volunteered.

“No, that’s okay,” I said in a slightly elevated voice. If he kept getting the drinks, Blossom would probably end up in a coma. “We’re just going to use the ladies room.” Hooking my arm around Blossom’s waist, I said to her, “Come on.” I was going to get her away from Viktor, even if I had to half drag her.

“No,” she whined. “I want to stay and party.”

“I think you’ve had enough partying for tonight.”

Blossom’s legs started turning into spaghetti, and I was barely able to get her over to a settee before she collapsed. “Oh, my,” Viktor said with false concern. He’d followed us quite happily. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

"No, you've done enough," I told him in an even louder voice, drawing the attention of some nearby guests, which was actually my intent. "Please, leave us alone!"

Viktor acted offended. "Don't blame me just because your friend doesn't know how to drink."

Blossom's head began to roll from side to side. She was obviously not going anywhere any time soon. I had to accept that we were in trouble and do the smart thing. I pulled out my cell phone and dialed my mom. She was going to be furious, and Blossom's mom was going to hit the roof, but a parent's wrath was better than trying to deal with a passed out friend while a predator like Viktor sniffed around. The only problem was my phone wasn't getting any bars. Every time I punched in my mom's number, all I got was dead air.

"There's no signal," Viktor explained smugly. "All this stone and no cell tower nearby makes it impossible to get a call out."

"Great," I grumbled to myself. "Now what am I supposed to do?"

A waiter sailed passed, and I hailed him. "Excuse me, but do you know where the Vanderlinds have a house phone? My cell isn't working."

"I guess I could ask Mr. Vanderlind," he replied vaguely.

"Would you ask Jessie Vanderlind, please?" He appeared to be much nicer than Daniel, and I wasn't sure which Mr. Vanderlind he meant. "In fact," I had an idea, "would you tell him that Aurora needs his help?"

"If I can find him," the waiter sighed.

I got the feeling that he had no intention of looking for Jessie, so I quickly added, "If you can bring him to me, there's a twenty in it for you." I didn't have a twenty, but he didn't know that.

The waiter might have had his suspicions about me paying up because he said, "Sounds good," and held out his hand.

"After you bring him."

As the waiter left, Viktor came closer. I could tell that my distress and Blossom's condition had him excited, but he was trying to hide his delight. He extended an arm and leaned against the wall so that he was towering over us on the settee. "There's no reason to call Jessie. I can be just as helpful as him."

"Step back! You're crowding us, and she needs air," I snarled.

"Ooh, the little girl has teeth." He laughed, not feeling at all compelled to comply.

"What did you give her?" I demanded.

Viktor shrugged. "Champagne."

"Yeah, I mean, what was in the champagne?"

"Bubbles."

His callous humor really had me upset. "Just get the hell away from us, okay? Just leave us alone."

Several of the party guests were now watching us as if we were performing some kind of play. No one offered us any aid; several people were openly amused.

"I'm just trying to help," Viktor said, as if the whole thing were my fault.

"Yeah, well you've helped enough for one evening."

"I've always found it's better to help myself," he said, setting down his glass and scooping Blossom up in his arms.

"Put her down!" I shouted, but it was no use. Viktor was already carrying her up the wide staircase that led to the second floor. I had no choice but to chase after him.

It was amazing how fast Viktor could mount the long flight of stairs carrying the dead weight of my friend. He was already outstripping me when the heel of my shoe twisted under me and my foot popped out of the sandal but remained tangled in the straps. I was delayed a few seconds as I wrenched both sandals off my feet. By the time I reached the top of the staircase, I barely saw Viktor disappearing with Blossom into a room. I charged after

them, jamming the sandals that were in my hands into the narrowing gap of the door as Viktor tried to push it closed.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I shoved the door open, Viktor putting up no resistance.

“Please,” he smiled his predator’s smile. “Join us.”

He’d laid Blossom on the bed in a large bedroom that was decorated in cream fabrics shot through with gold thread. There were large bay windows that I assumed faced out onto the river, but the heavy drapes were closed.

“Viktor,” I said in the steadiest voice I could muster, “you need to leave.”

“No,” he smiled. “You can leave, or you can stay; the choice is yours. But I am not leaving.”

“Yes, you are,” said an angry voice behind me. I spun around to see Jessie Vanderlind, and he looked furious.

Chapter 3

“Ah, our charming host,” Viktor said, smiling. “I was just helping myself to a few of the hors d’oeuvres. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I very much mind,” Jessie informed him. “These two are not on the menu this evening. You’ll have to sate your appetite elsewhere.”

Viktor frowned. He was a man not used to hearing the word no, or at least not listening to it. “I spoke to them, and they said they were not your particular friends.”

“They misspoke,” Jessie replied. “They are my very close friends, and I’m telling you that they are to be left alone.”

“Have it your way.” Viktor shrugged like the fabled fox that was denied the grapes. “They aren’t that enticing anyway.” He brushed past me on his way out of the room but stopped for a moment to say one more thing before he went. “I won’t forget your lack of hospitality, Jessie.”

“Nor will I forget your rudeness,” was the reply.

Once Viktor was gone, I breathed easier. “Thank you so much,” I sighed. “I’m really sorry for all this. I think Viktor slipped something into Blossom’s drink. She’s out cold. And then he dragged her up here, and I couldn’t get my cell phone to work.” I paused to take a breath, then laying my hand against my cheek, I said, “I’m sorry, I just didn’t know what to do.”

Jessie’s eyes lit up for a moment and then narrowed. “Where did you learn to do that?” he asked, gesturing toward me.

“Do what?” I looked down at my gown, not quite sure what he was talking about.

“No. With your hand to your cheek.”

“I don’t know.” I studied my hand as if it held the answer. “I’ve always done it, I think.” When I looked up again, Jessie

was staring at me, almost transfixed.

"You just remind me so much of someone I used to know many years ago," he breathed, reaching up to caress a lock of my hair.

"It couldn't have been that many years ago," I joked, uncomfortable under his gaze. "You can't be much older than me." I had just turned seventeen a week earlier and he didn't look a day older than that.

"I'm older than I look." He lingered with his hand in my hair, lost in his own thoughts.

"Do you have a phone I could borrow?" I asked, verbally nudging him out of his reverie. "I'd better call my mom to come get us."

Remembering himself, Jessie quickly lowered his hand. A part of me ached for him to touch my cheek, my lips, my neck, but I fought that longing. It was no time to indulge in a crush on a hot guy. He slid a gold pocket watch out of his jacket's breast pocket and regarded the time. "How long would it take your mother to get here?"

"I don't know. Depends how long it takes to get a hold of her and what she's doing," I explained. "Maybe twenty minutes. Maybe longer."

Jessie frowned at his watch before closing it and slipping it back in his pocket. "It's too close to midnight to take any chances. You'd better just stay here until the morning."

"I can't stay here all night," I told him. "My mom will freak."

"Better to have her worry for one night than to always wonder," he said, half to himself.

My adrenaline level, which had been lowering since Viktor left, began to rise again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you and your friend snuck into the wrong party. The smartest thing you can do is stay in this room; keep the door locked and the windows closed." He made his way toward the door. "Your friend should be fine by morning,

and then you can leave. In the meantime, do not come out under any circumstances. Do you understand?" he asked as he stood over the threshold.

"Why? What's going on?" I wanted to know. There was no way in hell I was going to stay locked in a room in some creepy castle all night.

He shook his head. "I cannot tell you. You'll have to trust me when I say it's for your own good." With that, he closed the door and was gone.

The instant he made his exit, I sprang forward and threw the lock. What kind of party was it, and what the hell was I going to do?

I knew I couldn't leave Blossom, even if it was to go get help. I was sure Viktor would be on her the instant I snuck out of the room. It was the law with girlfriends: if your friend passed out, you never left her alone—even at a party where you were friends with all the guys—because you just never knew. Not really. Being a good friend might ruin your evening, but being a bad friend might ruin her life. Blossom had acted like an idiot, but I was not about to leave her as prey to whatever letch happened past. I would just have to stay awake all night and deal with my mom in the morning.

A clock on the mantelpiece quietly ticked, keeping my mind on the time. The party grew louder and more raucous as the time inched toward midnight. The guests had filtered upstairs. Every once in a while, someone tried the handle of the door to our room, but finding it locked, quickly moved on. Blossom was breathing but, besides that, showed no signs of waking up any time soon. I became distinctly aware of my bladder. The bedroom we were in had no adjoining bathroom. *What the heck am I supposed to do?* I wondered. The hands of the clock met at the top of the dial, and it chimed out twelve beats. The party grew instantly quiet. Not just quieter but dead quiet. The music stopped and everything. It was bizarre.

The minutes dragged on, and still there wasn't a sound anywhere in the castle. At twenty after twelve, I could no longer hold my water. I had to find a bathroom or pee in the potted palm tree that was next to the bed. Cracking open the door, I opted against the palm.

There was no one in the hallway. I leaned out a few inches and peaked toward the staircase. Still no one. Not a sound, not a voice, not a whisper. I pulled the door quietly shut after me and started tiptoeing down the hall. There had to be a bathroom somewhere nearby. I mean, I knew it was a very old castle, but it had been modernized. They couldn't expect people to pee in chamber pots.

There were so many doors, and each had a different coat of arms carved above the arch. I saw a lot of knight's helmets and roosters, but nothing that would indicate a place to empty my bladder. How did people find their way around? One of the doors was open a crack, and I decided to peep inside, hoping to get lucky. I was literally about to burst.

There was a couple stretched across an elaborate four-poster bed. The woman was on her back, just an inert figure, not moving at all. Her long red hair was loose from where it had been pinned up, and her dress was pulled off one shoulder exposing her breast. The man was on top of her, enthusiastically hickeying her neck.

What was up with some guys and hickies? They were so tacky. And you'd think a classy guy in a tuxedo wouldn't feel the need to mar some beautiful woman's neck.

The woman seemed to gain consciousness for a moment, let out a soft sigh, and turned her head further to the side. I thought maybe she was trying to get away, but it only served to give the man better access to her neck. He lifted his lips briefly, and I saw something drip from them. It wasn't drool. It was red. Blood red. I could see that there was an open wound on the side of her throat. He hadn't been hickeying her like I thought. He had been drinking from her.

Chapter 4

Stifling a small shriek, I ran back down the hall as quickly and as quietly as possible. Fortunately, the room where I'd left Blossom had a very distinct crest of a wolf's head above the door, so I remembered it.

Inside the room, I quickly scanned for intruders then closed the door and threw the lock. "I'm losing my mind," I said to myself. I had to be losing my mind. There was no way I saw what I thought I saw.

I couldn't think. I couldn't focus. I said, "The hell with it," and watered the potted palm.

Afterwards, I sat on an overstuffed chair and forced myself to calm down and think rationally. Vampires do not exist, so I didn't really see what I thought I saw. It was more likely that Vanderlind Castle was just hosting some kind of kinky sex party and the guy in the tux had crossed the line in a major way. That also explained Viktor's behavior and why the other guests were so amused. Jessie probably thought that if my mom came by when things started getting really crazy that we would either get caught up in the debauch against our wills or my mom would call the cops.

How long could a person bleed from the neck until she died? I didn't know, but I was willing to bet it wasn't that long. I had to get her help and I had to do it immediately.

Blossom was still blissfully unaware of our predicament. I inspected the room and discovered the old Victorian wardrobe that was sitting in the corner wasn't very full. There was room for someone Blossom's size if I shoved all the shoes to one side. Hiding her wasn't as good as taking her with me, but at least I wasn't leaving her sprawled on the bed unconscious.

Even without dragging my comatose friend, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to make it out the front door, across the immense lawn, and through the iron gates without anyone noticing me. I decided I would have to leave the way we came in.

There was a weighty silver candlestick on a small table, so I grabbed it. If any perv came near me, I was going to give him a smack over the head with it. I knew a makeshift weapon was better than no weapon at all. I wasn't a fall-down-and-whimper kind of girl. If the perverts caught me, I was going to fight.

I slipped out the door, closing it firmly behind me. Blossom was as safe as I could make her. The hallway overlooked the great hall and no one seemed to be about, so I slunk down the stairs. It was only as my bare feet touched the cold marble floor of the main room that I cursed myself for not checking if the wardrobe had contained any shoes in my size. Still, I didn't want to risk going back up. There was the sound of water running and pots rattling coming from one direction, which I assumed was the kitchen. The staff must have been cleaning up.

I tiptoed along the wall of the great hall, heading for the patio. There was a drunk passed out on the floor, but besides that, the room was devoid of people. Standing to one side, I peeped out the large glass doors that opened onto the patio and dock area. It appeared deserted.

Once outside, I immediately started shivering. It was much chillier than when Blossom and I had started our misadventure. I hurried out on the dock and stepped onto the first yacht. "Hey! What are you doing there?" someone called from the patio doors. It was a servant, still in his purple livery.

"Oh, I'm not feeling well, so I'm calling it an early night," I told him, trying to keep my voice calm. "Thought I'd lie down in our boat, but I didn't want to disturb anyone." I'd

made it across the deck of the first boat and was transitioning to the second.

"Wait right there," he told me, then disappeared.

When you are trying to get away from someone and they give you a command, like "Be quiet," you should do the exact opposite of what they want. My mother taught me that, and I applied the principle immediately, scurrying across the second deck and leaping for the third boat.

A few more minutes of frantic scrambling and I was only two boats away from land. My movements, plus an unexpected wake, had all the boats bouncing, and I was grateful for my bare feet to help keep me from plunging over the side. As I sprinted across the deck, my foot caught on a rope, and I went sprawling. My knees would be bruised, and my legs were scraped. I was limping but not greatly injured. Unfortunately, I had let a small yelp escape my lips as I tumbled. It turned out there was a crew member asleep near the bow of the yacht, and my commotion woke him up. "What are you doing there?" he barked in an angry voice.

"Nothing. Just moving on. No reason to worry," I assured him as I prepared to transfer to the final boat before I could step off onto the public pier.

"You come back here!" he commanded, darting forward to grab me.

"Get the hell away from me!" I shouted as I leapt to the next boat. He was hard on my heels, obviously used to dealing with bobbing boats more than I was.

I scrambled across the final boat as fast as I could and was about to make the leap for the pier, just as he reached out to snag me. He didn't get a firm hold, but the contact threw me off balance, and I plunged into the cold, dark waters of the Tiburon River.

I made the mistake of shrieking as I fell, so when I landed, I got a good lung full of water. This caused me to panic a little, so when I tried to surface, I got disoriented in the dark and ended up smacking my head on the keel of the boat. At

that point, I guess I really panicked because I started thrashing around, trying to find the surface while I choked on the water that desperately wanted to expel itself from my lungs. Because it was dark and there were no street lamps or anything, I was having trouble telling which way was up.

I'm going to die, I thought. I'm going to drown because I was stupid enough to go on another one of Blossom's harebrained schemes. I felt myself starting to lose consciousness.

The cold arms of death grabbed me, pulling me down. They were so strong and held me so tightly, there was nothing I could do. I didn't have to fight. I could just let go.

Then we burst through the water's surface and someone was slapping me in the face shouting, "Breathe! Breathe, damn it!"

I started coughing, throwing up, and breathing all at the same time. I had gotten turned upside down in the water, and that's why I thought I was being pulled under rather than up. "Help me! Help me get her up!" my savior commanded someone who was apparently on the pier. I felt another set of hands reach for me, and I was lifted out of the water quite easily then dropped unceremoniously onto the wood planks of the pier. "Careful!" the man in the water barked as he hauled himself up beside me.

It was Jessie. He had risked his life to save me. His brother, Daniel, stood towering over both of us, looking down at me with disdain. "Now what are we going to do with her? You should have let her drown," he told his brother.

"No," Jessie said, sitting up and then pulling me into his lap where I continued to cough, unabated. "She's so like Colette, I could never do that."

"You deal with her, then. I'm not protecting her," Daniel snarled, turning on his heel and walking away.

I was freezing, half drowned, and my head was killing me, but being in Jessie's strong arms felt wonderful. I could have stayed curled in his lap all night. There was just something

about him that made me feel so safe, even though his brother didn't think I was worth saving.

"Why didn't you just stay in the room until morning like I asked you?" he said, smoothing my sodden hair off my face.

"There was a man," I managed to say between coughs. "He was torturing a woman. He'd cut her throat. I have to get help. She might die."

"I think you're a little confused," he said. "No one has been hurt at the castle. Everyone is fine."

I pressed my hand to my head where I had whacked it on the bottom part of the boat. There was a lump beginning to form. "Ow," I whimpered. Clouds that had previously been eclipsing the moon started to move aside, and I could see that the palm of my hand was red with blood.

"You're bleeding," Jessie said in a husky voice.

I looked up at his handsome face and started to scream. Peeking out between his full, beautiful red lips, I could see a set of gleaming white fangs.

Chapter 5

The Vanderlind Castle had a dungeon. I knew that for certain. I was lying on a cot in one of the cells, so I definitely knew there was a dungeon. Jessie was on the opposite side of the iron bars, looking in at me with a stricken face. I don't know what happened after I started screaming. I saw Jessie leaning over me with those horrible fangs marring his perfect face, and then everything went black. When I woke up, I was in the dungeon.

"Are you all right?" Jessie asked in a low voice.

"No, I'm not all right," I said. The cot was in the corner of the room furthest away from the bars, but I pressed myself against the stone wall, trying to put even more distance between us.

Jessie's eyebrows narrowed in concern. "Is it your head wound? I don't think you have a concussion."

"No," I said, wanting to laugh, feeling a touch hysterical. "It's the fact that you're a vampire."

He sighed, deflating a little. "I'm sorry you had to find out. It was the smell of your blood. I wasn't able to keep my fangs retracted." He put a hand, self-consciously, to his lips. "But you're safe now. I'm under control."

"Safe?" I laughed bitterly, waving a hand at the stone walls. "You've got me locked in a cell."

"I know." He nodded. "It was the safest place I could think to keep you." He reached into his jacket and pulled out an iron ring with a few large skeleton keys hanging off of it. "Here." He tossed the ring into the cell, missing the cot by a few inches. "Hang on to these, and don't open the door for anyone. I mean anyone. Do you understand me?"

I didn't understand him. I mean, he was speaking English, and I understood the words, but I was confused. "What do you mean? What are you doing?"

"I've got to go find your friend, and I need to know you'll be safe. Don't leave this cell. Not until morning. Promise me?"

"I promise," I lied.

"Good, now where's Blossom?"

"Like I'd tell a vampire," I blurted before I could think of a better answer.

"Aurora, listen to me," he said, pressing his face between the bars and looking directly into my eyes. "I need to get your friend and bring her here to you. I'm not the only vampire at the castle tonight. I can find her by myself, but that might take a while. If someone else discovers her first, she's as good as dead."

"She's in the wardrobe," I told him. "In the room where you left us. The one with the wolf's head carved over the door. I left her in the wardrobe."

"Good." He nodded decisively as he stepped away from the bars. "I'll get her, but you must do as I tell you, and stay in the cell. And hide the keys. You don't want anyone to know you have them."

Instantly, I snatched the ring off the floor and stuffed it under the thin blanket that was covering the cot. "Okay. I'll be fine. Just go get Blossom," I told him.

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed the keys and wrapped the blanket around my shoulders. My impulse was to make a run for it before he got back. But I knew from experience that my first impulse wasn't always the best. Jessie had saved me from drowning and trusted me with the keys. On the other hand, he admitted to being a vampire and locked me in a dungeon. My head throbbed. I was freezing, and I couldn't think clearly. I just didn't know what to do. My fight-or-flight instincts told me to run, but there was something about Jessie. Deep in the core of my being, I felt that he cared about me. I got the strong sense that I could trust him.

Footsteps caused me to conceal the keys with the blanket. I was so glad I did when Viktor appeared. "Well,

hello, my little hors d'oeuvre," he purred, eyeing me through the bars. "I'm so glad to see you're still here. Where is your delightful friend?"

I sent up a silent prayer of thanks that I hadn't unlocked the cell. Viktor was much easier to endure when there was a set of iron bars between us. I decided to ignore him.

"I asked you a question, little chick," he said, sounding a little annoyed that I wasn't eager to respond.

I decided to focus on the far wall and just wait for Jessie to return. I couldn't imagine any conversation with Viktor going in a direction that wouldn't haunt my dreams for the rest of my life.

"Answer me!" Viktor shouted, rattling the bars of my cage.

I didn't want to look at him. I knew without looking that he had fangs that he was desperate to apply to my neck. All I could do was wait it out and hope that Jessie didn't return with Blossom while Viktor was still there.

"You little bitch," the vampire snarled. "I was just going to enjoy a small taste of your blood, but your behavior is impudent, and I don't like impudence, especially from humans. I am going to drain you of every ounce of blood in your body. When I am through with you, you will be nothing but a dried out husk."

"Viktor!" Jessie appeared behind him, thankfully without Blossom. "I told you the girls were not to be touched."

Viktor wheeled around. "I don't take orders from you."

"This is my house," Jessie informed him. "If you do not want to obey the rules of the house then you need to leave."

The older vampire laughed, his fangs fully exposed. "Try to make me."

What happened next went so very quickly and the vampires moved so fast that I could barely follow it. Jessie went to grab Viktor by the collar, presumably to force him from the castle. Viktor knocked his hand away, and then the two of them were slugging and tearing at each other. I guess

Viktor had underestimated Jessie's strength because it was only a few seconds before he was racing for the dungeon stairs, Jessie hard on his heels.

I could hear the scuffle for a few minutes, but then it faded, and I heard nothing. I sat alone in my cell and tried not to cry. Vampires were real, and one of them had developed a strong dislike for me. That couldn't be good. I had no idea what had happened to Blossom. For all I knew, Jessie had drained her, and she was already dead. I never should have told him where she was.

But that didn't seem right. Something told me that wasn't an act of violence Jessie was willing to commit. My heart kept telling me I could trust him.

I forced myself to remember he was a vampire. By his own admission, he was a bloodsucker. The undead. A creature of the night. How trustworthy could he be?

After what felt like a year, Jessie finally returned, carrying the still unconscious Blossom in his arms. The shoulder of his jacket was a little torn, and there was a fine spray of blood staining his face and the white collar of his shirt.

Before I knew what I was doing, I sprang to my feet and ran to him, shoving my hands between the bars. "Are you all right?" I touched his ear, his cheek, his chest. I could find no wound that went with the blood.

Jessie gave a small shiver under my caress.

"Where is Viktor?" I asked, feeling embarrassed and quickly withdrawing my hands.

"He's gone," Jessie said, shaking his head as if to wipe the memory away. "He won't be bothering you again."

I didn't know if that meant the other vampire was dead or just driven from the property. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "How's Blossom?" I asked.

He looked down at my friend. "Still out cold. I'm so sorry this happened to you."

"We shouldn't have snuck into the party."

Our eyes met. "Would it be too terrible if I said a small part of me was happy that you did?" he whispered.

I held his gaze, feeling lost but also found. His face was so perfect, so beautiful. His eyes so deep and warm. He looked at me like I was the most precious thing on the planet, like I was a treasure that he had to keep gazing upon to convince himself that it was real.

He was a vampire. I had to keep reminding myself that he was a vampire. "What should we do about Blossom?" I asked, looking away and feeling my face grow hot.

"I want to put her in there with you. Hopefully, by morning she'll be able to walk, and you can both leave."

"And if she can't?" I wanted to know.

"We'll figure something out," he assured me. "If you open the door, I'll put her inside."

It was only after I looped my hands through the bars, shoved the largest skeleton key into the lock, and gave it a twist that I considered how dangerous it was opening the door to a vampire.

Hurrying in, Jessie placed Blossom on the bunk, went back out immediately without even glancing at me, turned the key in the lock again, and then tossed the ring on the bunk next to my passed-out friend. "Listen," he said, only then meeting my eyes. "It's only four o'clock, so there are still a few hours before dawn. Same rules apply. I'm going to stay with you if I can, but if I have to leave for any reason, do not open this door for anyone until dawn. Are we clear on this?"

I nodded, and he sighed, letting his shoulders sag a little with relief. I tucked the key ring under Blossom and then, after a moment's hesitation, spread the thin blanket I'd been wearing like a shawl over her. It was a little damp, but warm from my body heat.

"Here." Jessie stripped out of his tux jacket, thrust it through the bars, and tossed it at me. "I'm sorry; I didn't

think to get you any dry clothes or anything. I was just worried about, you know, making sure you were safe."

"Thank you," I said, catching the coat and slipping it on. It was reasonably dry, so he must have taken it off before diving in to save me. I can't say it was still warm from his body, but it did smell very nice, like one of those oranges that someone has studded with cloves to make a sachet. It smelled like Christmas, familiar in a way that made me feel cozy and safe.

Daniel came striding into the dungeon. He was no longer in his tux, but dressed impeccably in a dark suit that had obviously been custom tailored to fit him to perfection. His shoes made a judgmental snap, snap, snap as he walked across the stone floor.

"Now you have both of them in there?" he growled. "What's next? Are we going to be taking in stray cats?"

If I had been a cat, I would have tried to claw his face.

"Daniel," Jessie said in a calm voice, "please try to remember a time when you actually felt compassion for another being."

His brother sniffed. "That was too long ago."

"Can you at least understand that I still feel the emotion?"

"If you insist," Daniel said, giving an affected sigh. "But what are you going to do with them?" he asked, jerking his chin in my direction.

"I've got everything under control," Jessie assured him. "You'll have to trust me to do the right thing."

It was obvious from Daniel's expression that he had very little faith in his brother's ability to make good decisions. "She's not your precious girl, you know."

"You keep saying that, and believe me, I know."

Daniel shook his head. "I will never understand what the Bishops see in you."

"Compassion?" Jessie suggested, but his brother ignored it.

Scarcely sparing me a glance, Daniel departed, calling over his shoulder, "I expect this to be cleaned up by tomorrow night, or I'll be forced to clean it up for you."

Chapter 6

“How long have you been a vampire?” I asked. We’d been sitting in silence since Daniel left, Jessie lost in his own thoughts. There was a small stool in the cell, and I moved it over near the bars with the excuse that I didn’t want to disturb Blossom. But the truth was it was because I wanted to be close to him.

“Too long,” was the reply.

I humphed, hating those kinds of answers but realizing he was evading the question.

After a few more moments of silence, he said, “I was born in 1918.”

That was hard to digest. He looked no older than me, but he was closer to my great grandmother’s age. “Have you killed many people?” It was a question that I should have been afraid to ask, but I needed to know.

He shook his head. “Just one. And that was a long time ago.”

I wanted to ask him how he stayed alive without drinking human blood, but a large part of me didn’t want to know, so I satisfied myself by asking, “Have you always been a vampire?”

“No, vampires aren’t born; they are made. I was human for my first seventeen years,” he explained.

“I just turned seventeen,” I told him. I couldn’t imagine being transformed into a creature that would never die, but had to feed off the living. Especially as a teenager.

He stared at me again with his penetrating eyes. “That was how old Colette was when she...” he trailed off.

“When she what?” I asked, laying my hand to my cheek.

“When I was young, a very new vampire, I loved a girl. A human girl. You remind me so very much of her. The way you look, your mannerisms, even your feisty personality... I just

find it so very hard to believe you're not her. But how could you be?" He shook his head sadly. "You don't even know me."

I wanted to tell him that I felt like I knew him. That a part of me felt like I was his, even though we had never met. But it sounded so crazy, and he looked so sad. I didn't want to torture him with the false hope that I was somehow his lost love reborn.

"What happened to her?" I asked. "What happened to Colette?"

He closed his eyes to suppress some deep-seated grief, a wound that had never closed. "She was human," he said. "She died."

"Oh." I felt foolish for asking him such stupid questions. He was in pain, and I was making it worse.

"I need to talk to you about when you leave here," he said, his face very earnest. "You can't tell anyone about what you saw tonight or who we are. You can't share any of it."

"You can trust me," I assured him. No one would believe me anyway. "But Blossom might say something."

"No." He shook his head. "She's been asleep the entire time. The most she'll remember is the party."

"What happens if people find out?" I asked. "About you and your family being... you know..."

"That can't happen," he said gravely. "No one must know. It would be very unhealthy for Tiburon, and I don't want anything bad to happen. It's best if you say nothing."

"Unhealthy?"

"Colette, please," he said, reaching through the bars to grab my hand. "I want to protect you. Daniel has agreed to let me handle this, but if word got out, I don't think I could stop him from causing trouble. Do you understand how important it is for you to keep our existence a secret?"

"Yes," I whispered. The mere touch of his hand in mine filled me with such yearning, I would have promised him

anything. It was almost enough to make me forget that he had called me by another girl's name.

"It's getting late; I have to go," he said, standing up and releasing my hand.

"Now?" I asked, feeling like something had wrenched at my heart. "It'll be hours until dawn."

"It's best that I go now."

I nodded, not trusting my voice, my disappointment was so intense.

"You must leave as soon as it's light. Do not go out through the house. It would be best if the servants didn't see you leaving. There's a hidden passage beneath the steps, the ones that lead up to the castle. Look for the stone that is a little lighter than the rest and press it. You must press very hard. You'll see an opening that will take you down to the water. You can make your way along the river from there."

"I'm not sure I can carry Blossom," I said. She was still out cold, and her body being limp would make her extra heavy.

"I'll try to send a servant down to help you, but I can't promise. His name is Viggo. You can trust him as you would trust me."

He reached through the bars for my hand and lifted it to his lips. The brief contact of his mouth against my flesh gave me more pleasure than I had ever experienced from the kiss of any boy. He released my hand, and I felt the loss acutely. I did my best to suppress a wave of panic. "When can I see you again?" I blurted.

"Never," he said, shaking his head. "I'd be no good for you. I'm no good for anyone."

I don't know how long I just sat there after he left. It felt like my brain was full of molasses. I couldn't process everything that had happened in the last few hours. I hugged his tux jacket around me and then realized I was wearing his coat. With greedy fingers, I searched the pockets for little clues to his life. I found a crisp linen handkerchief

with the initials JAV embroidered in the corner in an ornate script.

Next, I found his pocket watch. It had no chain and wasn't an expensive gold piece like I had first assumed. Up close, I saw that it was only gold plate, and most of that had been worn away in spots. I popped it open, like I had seen him do. It was ten minutes after five. There was maybe another hour and a half until dawn, two hours tops. On the inside of the cover was an inscription. I squinted in the dim light of the dungeon to make it out:

Our love is timeless.

*All of my heart,
Lettie*

That's when my hands began to tremble.

Chapter 7

When the watch read a quarter to seven, I began trying to wake Blossom. At first, I was gentle, patting her hand and calling her name. When that produced no response, I got a little more aggressive, giving her a good shake and even going so far as to smack her cheeks, but not very hard because that just didn't seem right. I did not try shouting in her ear, remembering Jessie's warning about not being caught by the staff. Nothing I did produced any response, and I began to wonder if, instead of trying to sneak Blossom into her bed at home, I should be taking her to the hospital. At seven, I gave up and decided I would have to drag her from the castle. It wasn't going to be easy on either of us, but it was better than leaving her there.

As I inched along, Blossom's feet scraping on the rough stone of the dungeon, scuffing the heck out of her mother's heels. They also left a trail of where we had been. When I got her to the stairs that led to the castle, I set her down on the steps so I could rest for a moment. Once I had caught my breath, I returned to our cell with a broom made out of twigs that I found in a corner. I used it to scatter the dirt in a random pattern so the vampires would not be able to track us once they were awake.

Next, I examined the stone work at the base of the stairs. There wasn't much color variation of any of the stones; they all appeared a uniform gray. But then I noticed there were smaller stones mixed randomly in with the larger ones, and several of those were a bit more pale than the rest. I pushed each of them one by one and nothing happened. Not good. I thought about Jessie's instructions and tried again, giving each a hardy shove with the palm of my hand. The third stone gave a little, hung for a second, and then gave a little more. A seam in the stonework appeared. I pushed on that,

and it widened to a gap. Further effort made an opening large enough for me to slip through. Dragging Blossom through took a lot more effort.

The passageway was dark and narrow, but I could see a small light at the far end of it, which I assumed was the shore of the river. And I could stand up, which was helpful for dragging my unconscious friend. I don't know what I would have done if I'd had to crawl.

Every few yards, I put Blossom down and backtracked to cover our trail by sweeping the ground. It wasn't easy, and I wasn't fast moving, but I figured I had quite a few hours until the sun set again, so I wasn't going to stress about it.

Then I heard someone open the castle's door to the secret passage. The door made a loud squeak. For a second, I froze with indecision. Should I run, or should I stand and fight? I looked down at Blossom's unconscious form. I wanted to strangle her for being such an idiot, but I didn't want anyone else to cause her harm. I had to face whoever was headed down the passageway. At least, I knew he or she probably wasn't a vampire.

"Okay," I said to myself, hopping up and down a little and shaking my arms to keep loose. I reminded myself: knees to the groin, heel palm strikes to the nose. If I were facing an assailant on the street, I would have added shouting "No!" to my defense strategy, but I really didn't want to call the attention of everyone who happened to be awake in the castle. Something occurred to me. The previous summer, my mom had made me take a self-defense course through the Tiburon police department. I had complained bitterly at the time, but I was suddenly profoundly grateful.

Whoever was approaching had brought a flashlight and was keeping it pointed toward the ground. I could make out a bit of his silhouette; he was ridiculously tall and had to stoop a little to fit in the passageway. I wondered if there was a way to use his height in such a small space against him. "You better stop right there," I said in as firm of a voice

as I could muster. "We don't want trouble, but we are willing to fight you."

My comment elicited a deep, rumbling chuckle that echoed through the tunnel. "Are both of you going to fight me, or vill you start the scuffle while your friend rests a little longer?"

Great, an assailant with a sense of humor, I thought.

"My name is Wiggo," the man said in what sounded to me like a Russian accent. "Jessie Wanderlind said you might be wanting some help with your friend."

"Yes, please," I said, going almost limp with relief. "I can take her head if you'll grab her legs."

"There is no need," Viggo said, coming forward. "I vill take her. You may hold the torch." I had no idea what he was talking about until he thrust the flashlight in my hands. "Give me some room," he said, crowding me away from Blossom. I stumbled for a moment then found my footing and positioned the flashlight so he could see what he was doing. Viggo scooped Blossom up like she was a rag doll and started walking with a heavy tread down the tunnel. "You can sweep with your little broom if you like," he told me. "It doesn't really matter because the wampires can smell you no matter vhat, but if it makes you feel better..." Feeling completely foolish, I trailed behind them, dragging the twig broom.

After what was probably another hundred feet, the tunnel got shorter and shorter, so even I had to hunch. Viggo set Blossom down. "You have a car by the pier, or you need I should come vith you?"

"Uh... I can probably handle it from here," I told him.

"Good," he nodded. "I do not like going through the little door." He pointed to a small opening that was blocked with the same type of iron bars that were in the dungeon. "You go first, and I vill shove her through. Be sure you close the gate before you leave. It is never healthy vhen people sneak into the castle."

“Okay.” I handed him the flashlight and squatted down. There was a strong-looking, rusty latch on the inside. Once released, which took a little effort, I was able to push the bars open like a door. Before I wiggled through, I called back over my shoulder, “Thank you so much for your help, Viggo.”

“Remember, you must never come back to Wanderlind Castle,” was his reply.

Once outside, I realized the exit was mocked up to look like a storm drain about twenty yards from the public pier. I got to my feet, and Viggo immediately started feeding Blossom through the small door. I dragged her out from my end then pushed the bars closed, rattling them to make sure the latch had caught.

It was a beautiful day in Tiburon, Ohio. I could hear kids laughing and birds twittering as they flew from tree to tree. It was challenging to adjust my brain to the new reality after escaping a castle infested with vampires through a secret passage with the help of a Russian giant.

“My head hurts,” Blossom whined as we drove through town. “I need some coffee. And waffles. Let’s go to Denny’s.”

I probably should have been screaming at her after all she’d put me through, but I was so relieved that Blossom was back among the living that all I could say was, “I think we’d better go home first. I’m sure our moms are furious.”

“What happened?” Blossom made a little spitting noise and removed what appeared to be a dog hair from her tongue. “Were we out all night? I don’t remember anything. What happened to that hot guy? Viktor?” She said it speculatively, testing out the name to see if it felt right. “You know, the one that kept getting us the drinks.”

“You mean the potential rapist who drugged your drink and then carried you up to one of the bedrooms?” I asked.

Blossom’s sleep-encrusted eyes grew wide. “He did not?”

“He did.”

“Oh, my God!” Blossom did a quick underwear check and was somewhat relieved to see she was still wearing them. “He didn’t... I mean... You stopped him before...”

“You’re still a virgin,” I assured her in a droll tone. “But you’re lucky Jessie Vanderlind helped me get rid of him because handsome jerk-face was pretty determined to screw you.” I couldn’t tell her that the sicko psycho actually wanted to drain her of all her blood while he was at it, but I thought she should at least know that she’d been in danger.

“He wanted to have sex with me while I was unconscious?” She gulped. “You don’t think he’d do that, do you?”

“Blossom,” I practically shouted. “He’s the one that drugged you. Of course, I think he’d do that.”

We drove along in silence for a few minutes as Blossom absorbed what I had just said. “Thanks for taking care of me,” she whispered.

I glanced in her direction and saw that a few tears were sliding down her cheeks. “Of course.” I reached over to squeeze her hand. “Just don’t be such a ding dong next time. You’ve got to think about motives.”

She sniffed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’ve got to think about a guy’s motives. Some guy in his thirties encouraging teenage girls to get trashed probably isn’t up to any good.”

Blossom looked over at me, her eyes still a little runny. “I know this isn’t going to sound like a compliment, but I totally mean it like one...”

“What?”

“You seem so much older than me sometimes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks.”

Chapter 8

I was all worried about Blossom's mom freaking out, but she wasn't even home. There was just a note on the counter saying she'd be out for the day and she was sorry she'd missed Blossom the night before.

Blossom looked at the note, made a face, and said, "Translation? She's sneaking around with her boyfriend so much she doesn't even realize I never came home." I couldn't tell if Blossom was relieved or annoyed. Probably both, but I wasn't going to ask because I needed to get my clothes and get the heck home before my mom went nuclear.

As we were getting changed in Blossom's room, she began taking note of her bedraggled appearance. Her hair was tangled; her dress was a mass of wrinkles and covered in dirt; her sandals were scuffed to the point of no return. "What the hell." She examined a tear in her mother's gown. "I thought you said the perv took me to a bedroom. Why do I look like a homeless person going to prom?"

"Well..." I stalled, my brain scrambling for a good excuse.

"And why are you wearing a tuxedo jacket?" she asked, looking me over. I guess she'd been too out of it to focus on me when we were in the car.

"I borrowed the jacket because I was cold. And we were asked to leave the party, but you were still passed out, so I kind of had to drag you out of there. And we fell down a couple of times. And then I let you sleep it off under the pier for a couple of hours," I said lamely.

"Oh." Blossom frowned. "Why were we asked to leave the party? I thought that Jessie guy said we could stay."

"Listen, can I just tell you about it later? I need to get home before my mom calls the police. Let's just say it was a really rough night." I pulled on my clothes quickly before

she could come up with more questions. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?" I said, grabbing Jessie's jacket and heading for the door.

Blossom was too engrossed in examining a large snag in the gown I had been wearing. "I'm going to have to burn this stuff," she said, mostly to herself. "If Mom finds it, she's going to kill me."

When I got home, I immediately bolted upstairs and hopped in the shower. I didn't want my mom to catch me covered in dirt with twigs in my hair. I left Jessie's jacket in the trunk of my car to be smuggled in later. Looking a mess was one thing, but a tuxedo jacket would lead to a lot more questions than I had answers.

I turned the water to as hot as I could stand and then eased myself under the downpour. Aches and pains that I didn't even know I had made themselves known. I closed my eyes and just let the water massage the top of my head. My world had changed, and I wondered if it was for the better.

I was so grateful that Jessie had forgotten to retrieve his jacket. It was an excuse to see him again. I knew he said we shouldn't, and I knew he was a vampire. All signs indicated that I should just forget he existed, but that would never happen. That metal string running through my body was vibrating, and there was no way to stop it. My entire being felt drawn to him in a way that didn't make sense, even to me.

Scrubbed clean, I wrapped a towel around my hair, slipped into my big terrycloth bathrobe, and headed for the kitchen. This was something I did all the time, and I wanted to appear as normal as possible.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. "Hey," I grunted at her then stuck my head in the fridge.

"Hey, yourself," she said, not sounding too pleased, but not furious. "When did you come home last night?"

This is my mom's weird way of trying to catch me in a lie. It wasn't very effective because she always phrased things so oddly that I could tell when she suspected me of something. "I didn't. Remember? I stayed at Blossom's," I said, pulling out some orange juice and the butter dish.

"Were you ever going to tell me that?"

I shot her an annoyed look and then reached for the bread. "I left you a message. If you didn't want me to stay, you should have called me back."

"Aurora, are you lying to me? I didn't get a message from you saying anything."

I reached into my bathrobe pocket and retrieved my phone, then pulled up my list of recent calls. Her cell number was right at the top. "See," I said, letting her have the phone. The fact that I never got through when I called while I was in the clutches of a vampire was not something I felt I particularly needed to share.

Mom frowned at the phone. "I never got a message," she said. "You should have called back and asked me directly. I was worried about you."

"I'm sorry," I said, depressing the lever on our toaster and then circling round to give her a squeeze. "I was just hanging out with Blossom."

"Are you sure that's all you were doing?" Mom asked, scrutinizing my face.

"What else would we be doing?" I asked, trying not to lay my innocence on too thick. "Call Blossom's mom if you need to check on me." I was taking a risk saying that, but it was a calculated risk. Mom knew I would never suggest she call Mrs. Coster unless I was doing what I said I was doing. Also, there was a good chance Mrs. Coster wouldn't answer her phone, and then my mom would probably just forget about it.

"Maybe I should," Mom said, biting her lip and giving me a suspicious look.

I shrugged and went to retrieve my toast.

I knew she'd decided against checking on me when she said, "Just stay in better contact with me next time. There are a lot of weirdoes out there in the world, and I don't like having to worry about you."

"Okay," I said, scraping some butter along the toast. "Sorry, Mom."

I wondered what my mom would think if I told her there was a family of vampires living in the castle down by the river. I sincerely doubted she would have believed me.

"I was thinking about visiting Grandma Gibson this afternoon," I said between bites of my breakfast.

Mom perked up. "That would be nice. I'm sure she'd love to see you." We both knew the likelihood of my great grandmother even recognizing me was slim. "What inspired this?"

"I don't know," I lied. "Just thought maybe she was lonely. And it's kind of cool listening to her when she's actually... you know... with it," I said, tapping my head.

"I should probably go with you," Mom said, getting up and putting her cup in the sink. "She's so old, and she's not going to be around forever. What time were you thinking of going?"

I silently cursed, not having factored my mother into a little plan I had formulated in the shower. "Uh, I don't know. Maybe three-ish."

"Oh." Mom pursed her lips a little. "I just remembered I have to pop by the office to do a few things." I opened my mouth to say it wasn't a problem, but Mom assumed I was about to say something else. "I know, it's Sunday, and I shouldn't be working, but you know what I do is important, so if it means putting in a few hours on my day off then I shouldn't complain."

"I know," I assured her, inwardly taking a sigh of relief. "And I'm sure all your clients appreciate it."

My mom was such a good person that I felt like a jerk for not wanting her to come along. But I needed to talk to

Grandma Gibson on my own for once and hope that it was one of her more clear-headed days. As penance for getting away with everything I'd just gotten away with, I decided to never go on another one of Blossom's harebrained schemes ever again. And to do my best to stop her from starting out on any herself. Yes, I had made those kinds of promises to my mother before, but this time, I was making it to myself. Blossom and I had come terrifyingly close to getting into the kind of trouble you can never get out of.

Chapter 9

The Ashtabula Home for Elder Care is not the nicest place to spend your golden years, but it's also not the worst. My grandmother on my mom's side died when she was in her sixties, but her mother, Grandma Gibson, had turned the corner on ninety and just kept going. She lived with us for quite a while, but when her mind started going, Mom was afraid to leave her at home alone. It killed my mother to put her own grandmother in a home, but she felt like she had no choice.

Because my mom is my mom, she researched every old age home in a forty-mile radius from our house and thought that Ashtabula was the best. It didn't stink as much as some of the other homes, and they didn't just leave the old people hanging out in wheelchairs in the hallways like they did at some places.

"Aurora Keys to see Lillian Gibson," I told the woman at the front desk. My great grandmother had switched back to her maiden name after her husband died. She never explained why beyond that she always felt like a Gibson.

The woman gave me a slow smile. "Well, aren't you sweet. Coming to see your grandmother."

"Great grandmother, actually," I said, returning her smile. The people at Ashtabula Care seemed to be genuinely nice.

The lady scanned her schedule while I signed in. "She's got bingo at four-thirty, but she's free until then."

I had never in my life seen my great grandmother participate in bingo, but that didn't mean she wasn't on the schedule. Ashtabula tried to encourage their residents to stay active. "Is she in her room now?" I asked.

"She should be. Or she'll be in the common room."

I thanked the lady and headed down the hall.

Old age homes made me feel bad. There were so many people just parked there with no one visiting them. It was a place to hide the elderly away and then forget about them. I made a mental note that I had to visit Grandma Gibson once a week, whether she remembered me or not.

The door to her room was open, so I stuck my head in. Grandma had a lot of her things there from her house, so it felt a lot more personal than the common areas of the home. She was sitting at a small card table that she'd covered with a fringed shawl to make it more attractive. There were playing cards on the table, all lined up for solitaire, but Grandma was just staring at them like she'd started a game and then simply forgotten about it.

"Knock, knock," I said, instead of actually knocking. "Hello, Grandma Gibson, it's your great granddaughter, Aurora." She looked up at me, a little startled. I gave her a big smile and said, "May I come in?" and then entered the room, assuming the answer would be yes.

"Lettie?" she asked, her eyes growing wide.

"No, Grandma, it's me—Aurora."

"Lettie, dear," she said, holding out both her hands toward me. "You've come back to us. You've come back at last."

I hated when she was like that. I hated being mistaken for someone who was dead. But her face looked so happy, and she was reaching out to me, reaching into the past. I took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Lillian," I said, rushing forward to give her a hug. "I missed you so much."

We embraced, and Grandma Gibson held me close. She smelled like old person—scented soap and hairspray. She was crying, and I felt the damp of her tears on my cheek. "I missed you so much," she whispered, then let out a tiny sob. "Why did you stay away for so long?"

"I'm sorry. I missed you, too," I replied, hoping she wouldn't ask me where I'd been.

"Sit down, and let me look at you," she said, finally breaking our hug. I pulled up a chair and we sat, her holding my hand, her eyes dancing with delight. "You always were the beauty," Grandma said. "You haven't changed a bit."

"I think I must have," I told her, unconsciously putting my hand to my cheek. I hated lying to her about who I was, but she was happy, so that was at least something.

She reached up and took my other hand, giving it a warm squeeze. "No, you're exactly the same. Your clothes are different, but I'd know you anywhere."

An idea occurred to me. "Can we look at your picture album?" I asked. "You still keep it, don't you?"

"Of course, I do," she clucked. "But you'll have to get it down for me. I'm afraid I'm a bit tired today."

I hurried to where she kept her photo album in the closet, up on a shelf, realizing after I'd already grabbed it that she hadn't told Lettie where it was, but she didn't seem to notice. "Ah," she said when I handed the album to her. "I love to look at photos. Don't you?"

"Yes," I told her. Most of my photos were on my phone, but that didn't mean I didn't like looking at them. "Let's look at the photos from when you were a girl." If I was serious about pretending to be her sister, I should have said, *when we were girls*, but it just didn't feel right lying to her if I could avoid it.

Grandma opened the book to the very beginning. There were some old photos with scalloped edges that were held in place at the corners with black triangles. "There we are with Mother and Father," she said, pointing to a photo with two very little girls in matching dresses and a parent holding each. "That's Grandma Gibson's house." It was weird to think about someone so old having a grandmother, but I guess everybody did. "And there's Papa's first car." She tapped at a black automobile that looked more like a couple of boxes on wheels than a vehicle.

"Do you have any photos of you as a teenager?" I prompted.

"Oh, let's see." Grandma turned over two pages. "Here we both are ready for a dance. I remember my date was Walter Bennett," she said, touching the corner of a picture of two girls in organdy dresses. She looked up at me. "I can't remember your date's name for the life of me. I know he was a friend of Walter's. What was his name again?"

"I can't remember," I said in a small voice. "How old are you here?" I asked.

"Let's see, I must have been about seventeen."

That meant Lettie was sixteen. A year before she ran away. I leaned closer to look at the girl in the photograph. Did she look like me? Did I look like her? It was so hard to tell with her old fashioned clothes and her hair being styled so different. It looked like she was trying to tame her mane with some type of hair gel or something. I stared at her face and tried to see my own reflection. Was it like when you hear a recording of your voice and don't recognize it as being you?

Grandma Gibson flipped the page. "And here we are on our first day at the castle," she said. "Papa was so proud." She caressed the edge of a photo of two young women in black dresses and white aprons posing in front of the Vanderlind Castle gates, the building itself barely distinguishable in the background.

"Did you like working there?" I asked.

Grandma sighed. "At first I did. I liked it very much. It was exciting to be associated with a family that was so well to do and so refined." She went on, "And I was happy we could bring in a little extra money for Mama and Papa. But then..."

I waited a moment for her to collect her thoughts. "Then what happened?" I coaxed, hoping to glean a few more details.

Grandma Gibson just sat there, staring at the page, transfixed with some memory that she couldn't bring to her

lips. I wanted to press her. I was desperate to know more about the castle and its occupants, but something was wrong. Grandma's breath was coming in short little gasps. "But then..." she choked out, reliving an obviously painful memory.

"Let's not look at these now," I said, closing the book and gently taking it from her. I couldn't do it. No matter how much I wanted to know about Jessie, I couldn't grill a fragile old lady into being sad. "I'd rather talk about happier things. Like that dance with..." I scrambled for his name, "like that dance with Walter. Did he bring you a corsage?"

Grandma dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief she'd had tucked up her sleeve. Then she smiled and said, "He wanted to bring me a lily, because of my name, but they were so very expensive. Instead, he gathered a bunch of wildflowers from along the road and made a bouquet out of that."

"Did he court you?" I tried to use the vernacular she would appreciate.

"Yes, we were quite the item for a while. We even talked of getting married."

"Really?" I was surprised. It was the first I'd heard of this flower-picking beau. "What happened?"

"He died in the war. He wanted to get married before he left, but I thought we should wait so we could have a real wedding," she said, again looking quite sad. Oh, great. There didn't seem to be a way I could keep from depressing my great grandmother. "The Bennetts lost both their boys at Normandy," she went on. "They were so proud when their sons enlisted. And then to lose them both. They never got over it." Grandma shook her head. "It's a terrible thing to outlive your children."

"How did you meet your husband?" I asked, not wanting her to dwell on the fact that her own daughter had been gone for quite a few years.

"I was working at Zucker's, and he came in looking for a reed for his clarinet. We didn't carry much stock at the time, so I had to order it. He picked it up but was back the next week claiming he needed another one. He purchased a good four or five reeds before he worked up the nerve to ask me out," she said with a smile.

"What were some of your favorite songs back then?" I asked, feeling relieved I'd managed to turn the conversation to happier memories.

After another twenty minutes of reminiscing, I could tell Grandma Gibson was getting tired. As I got up to put her photo album away for her, I asked, "Would it be okay if I borrowed one of your photographs?" She didn't look too enthused, so I quickly added, "I'll bring it right back, I promise."

Grandma Gibson narrowed her eyes at me. "When?"

I did some mental scanning of my schedule. "Saturday afternoon."

"I guess it would be okay," she said a bit reluctantly. "But please be very careful. I need my memories."

"I will. Thank you, Grandma," I said, giving her a kiss on the cheek before slipping the photo of her and her sister in front of the castle out of the album.

"You're welcome, Aurora," she smiled. Sometime during our conversation, I had turned back into myself.

Chapter 10

On the way home, I stopped by Tiburon Copies and had them laser scan the photo. “Is that the castle?” the clerk asked after he’d completed the scan and I’d paid for my copies.

“Yeah, my great grandmother used to work there,” I told him.

“Cool,” he nodded. When I’d entered the shop, he’d barely spared me a glance, but my interesting family history had earned me a second look. “Is this your grandmother?” he asked, tapping at Aunt Colette. “You look just like her.”

“Don’t do that,” I snapped, knocking his hand away and snatching up the picture. Was he an idiot? He looked offended, so I explained, “You always hold an old photo by the edges. The oil from your fingers can ruin it.” I used the hem of my cotton t-shirt to gently clean the photo.

“Relax. I didn’t hurt it any,” he said, blowing off my reprimand. A typical guy response when corrected for inconsiderate behavior.

“Would it kill you to be respectful of other people’s property?” I glared at him.

Heading out of the copy shop, I had to chuckle at myself. Maybe Blossom was right. Maybe, in a way, I was older than my seventeen years.

By the time I pulled into the driveway of our modest two-bedroom home, my eyelids were threatening to slam shut. I realized I really hadn’t slept the night before, and it was probably just adrenaline keeping me going.

I had meant to stay awake until at least nine o’clock to keep on some semblance of a schedule, but my body had other ideas. I grabbed a sandwich and sat down in front of the TV. I thought I was just resting my eyes for a second, but

the next thing I knew my mom was gently shaking me and saying, "Sweetheart, you should just go upstairs to bed."

It was a quarter to midnight as I brushed my teeth and got ready for bed. The previous night, I had been locked in a bedroom at the castle, completely oblivious to the fact that vampires existed. The thought that they were real gave me the shivers. I'd been so focused on talking to Grandma Gibson and thinking about Jessie that I hadn't really given any thought to the idea that there were other vampires in the world.

How many of the castle's guests were vampires, and how many were dinner? Was the woman with the long red hair that I saw in the bedroom dead now or just feeling a little anemic? Where did all the other vampires live? Were they all from the same place or scattered across the country? I should have asked Jessie more questions when I had the chance. Even though I had every right to be exhausted, I couldn't fall back asleep until well after three in the morning.

When I finally did drift into a dream, it was one of those times when you're not sure when you actually started dreaming. Things made sense that wouldn't actually make sense if I was awake. First, I noticed beams of color on the walls of my room and wondered if there was a prism hanging somewhere that was catching the light. I went to catch the beams, but they fluttered out of my hands like butterflies on a breezy day.

I was in a very good mood. Just plain happy. The sun was shining, and I felt its warmth on my face. Bees buzzed around my head, and birds raced through the air chirping to one another. I caught the splashes of color by their stems, gathering a bouquet. I breathed in the sweet fragrance of the flowers, humming to myself, the grasses and leaves tugging gently at the hem of my dress.

High school can be boring at the best of times, but it becomes particularly tedious when you have much more enticing things to think about. Fear of vampires had filled my head while I was lying awake in bed for half the night, but visions of Jessie filled my daydreams. I tried to focus on what my teachers were saying, but it just seemed to be random words coming out of their mouths. None of it made any sense. I didn't even recognize my own name when Mr. Schwartzman called on me in chemistry. He must have said my name three or four times before I made sense of his words and told him I didn't know the answer. Rather than being angry at me for spacing out, he asked, "Are you feeling all right today, Aurora? You look very pale. Do you need to see the nurse?"

I told the nurse that I had bad cramps and just needed to lie down for a while. But being in the quiet, dimly lit exam room resting on a cot made things much worse. There was absolutely nothing to distract my brain from thoughts of Jessie. After about twenty minutes of torture, I told the nurse I was feeling much better and went to my next class. Distraction was the key. I had to keep my brain busy.

Doing my homework during study hall, actually making an effort to participate in gym class, taking on extra hours at the cafe where I worked making cappuccinos and heating up blueberry muffins—these were all devices I used to pass the time. The week slowly inched along. By day, I was a model student and employee, putting in the extra effort on everything I was assigned; by night I was an insomniac. When I did manage to fall asleep, my dreams alternated between terror and longing. I really wished I didn't know vampires existed, but mostly, I wished I could see Jessie again.

Right when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, it was finally Thursday. The longest Thursday in the history of Thursdays, but still, it was the only day when the library

stayed open late. And the library was the only place I had ever seen Jessie outside of Vanderlind Castle.

I couldn't believe how nervous I was about seeing him. I spent at least an hour applying makeup, realizing it was too heavy, washing my face and trying again. My hair had decided to go on a rampage, and I practically needed a whip and a chair to tame it. I headed over to the library at six o'clock. The sun had not set at that point, but I couldn't hold out any longer.

I love the library. I can usually get lost in the stacks for hours browsing from book to book. But on that day no book could hold my attention. I positioned myself in a chair that had a partial view of the library's front door. Every time someone came in, I looked up eagerly. Every time, it wasn't Jessie.

"We're closing up now," the librarian told me at five minutes to nine. "If you want any books, you should take them to checkout."

I waited until the last possible second before slouching out to the parking lot and heading toward my car. He hadn't shown. Jessie hadn't shown. I'd been obsessing about him all week, convincing myself that he was also thinking about me. But no, he wasn't. If he had wanted to see me, he would have gone to the library. I was just some foolish girl that reminded him of someone he used to love.

"Hey there, pretty lady."

I looked up, startled out of my reverie. There was a guy leaning against my ancient VW Beetle. It was the only car left in the patrons' parking lot, and he had chosen it as a place to roost. "Uh... excuse me," I said, a little cautiously. What in the hell did he think he was doing?

"You headed home or just heading out?" the man asked, one eyebrow cocked in what he must have assumed was a charming, devil-may-care expression.

I knew from my mom that any time a guy tried to block access to my car, my home, an exit, whatever, it was not a

good sign. After all, if I was a man would he have been leaning against my car smirking? I doubt it. I was a teenage girl and my new friend was pleased to think he was in a position of power.

I did a quick inventory of the guy. He was in his late twenties, probably close to six feet tall; he was wearing a dirty jean jacket and had his arms folded awkwardly over his chest, possibly concealing a weapon. I took a brief scan of the parking lot. He appeared to be alone. Unfortunately, so was I.

I glanced back at the library just as the lights were turned off. That meant the door was locked from the inside, and the librarians were headed out the back to the staff parking lot on the other side of the building. "Crap," I whispered to myself.

My actions appeared to amuse my new friend. He gave me a slow smile, very pleased with how uncomfortable he was making me. "Don't you know where you're going?" he asked.

"Step away from my car and leave me alone," I said in a loud, firm voice. I actually had to force myself to say it with authority. My inner girl had almost said, "Would you please leave me alone?" but that was asking him to do something. That put him in charge.

"And what if I don't want to?" he asked, his smugness continuing. "What if I say no?"

"Step away from my car and leave me alone," I said in a much louder voice. I wasn't going to engage him in his "what if" game of cat and mouse.

"Whoa, whoa, quiet down, now." He held up both hands trying to gentle me. "There's no reason to shout," he said, lowering his own voice.

There was every reason to shout. The Tiburon Library wasn't out in a cornfield somewhere. It was near the center of town, and there were houses on all sides. I wasn't going to quiet down in hopes of placating the sleaze ball. "If you

don't step away from my car and leave me alone, I am going to start screaming my head off," I told him in a voice that was just below yelling.

"Relax. You don't have to be so uptight," the perv told me. "I'm just trying to be friendly."

"You're not being friendly," I told him. "You're harassing me, and you're blocking my access to my car."

"I told you to be quiet," he snapped at me, not at all pleased I wasn't proving to be an easy target but still trying to gain control over me.

"No! Now get away from my car, and leave me alone," I repeated at my loudest volume yet.

The guy gave me a look that was sheer venom. His easygoing demeanor had vanished. "You little bitch," he said in a snarling whisper. "I was being nice, but now I am going to make you so sorry."

The porch light went on at a house across the street, and I moved in that direction, never taking my eyes off the jerk for more than a second and still glancing around from time to time to make sure no one else was sneaking up on me. The door to the house opened and an old man shuffled out. "Is everything all right out here?" he asked.

"No, it's not all right." I looked over at him, just for a brief moment. "I need help."

There was a sound like a flag flapping in a stiff breeze, accompanied by a muffled shriek.

"This jerk is harassing me and won't let me into my..." I looked back to keep an eye on my potential assailant, but he was gone. Not just that he'd walked away—the parking lot was completely empty.

"What's that, young lady?" the man on the porch asked.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "There was some guy harassing me, but I guess he left when you came out. Would you mind standing there for a minute while I get in my car? I'm worried he might come back."

"I guess so. Be quick about it," the old man muttered.

“Thank you so much,” I called to him over my shoulder as I jogged over to my car, jammed my key in the lock, and scrambled inside, immediately locking the door again and starting up the engine.

Seeing me reasonably safe, the old man went back in his house. I released the clutch and pulled out of the parking lot. Where the hell was that guy? I scanned the sidewalks all around me. He had to be around somewhere. He didn’t just vanish into thin air.

I began to shiver a little. Partially because of my confrontation with the perv and partially because I didn’t know what happened to him. I was definitely spooked. When I got home, I pulled my car into the garage, something I usually don’t do in nice weather, and didn’t get out until the garage door was completely closed and I was sure no one was in there with me.

“Hi, honey,” my mom called from where she was sitting at the kitchen table as I let myself into the house. Her smile faded once she got a look at my face. “What’s wrong?” she asked, immediately concerned.

“I was at the library and some perv was harassing me in the parking lot,” I said, opening the fridge.

“You’re kidding,” she gasped, my statement turning her smile into a full frown. “What happened?”

“Well, I was the last one out of the lot and this jerk was just there, leaning on my car,” I told her, pouring myself a glass of milk.

“What did you do?” she wanted to know.

After I told her the full story, she said, “Can you describe him?”

“I guess so,” I said, shrugging.

“Good. We’ll go and talk to the police tomorrow. They should at least be alerted that there might be trouble.” We had a very well-funded police department, and they took their job of keeping Tiburon a nice town seriously. I was about to protest, but Mom anticipated me and added,

“Honey, what if the next time he tries to prey on someone who doesn’t handle it as well as you did? You wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to someone else, would you?”

“No,” I had to admit.

“Good.” She got up and gave me a squeeze. “By the way, I’m not going to scold you for being alone in an empty parking lot at night because you handled it so well.”

This made me laugh a little. “Thanks, Mom.”

I didn’t say anything to my mother, but I had a very bad feeling about the guy in the parking lot. First of all, he was up to no good, and it’s always creepy when you encounter someone like that, but secondly, I felt weird about what happened to him. It was like he was just plucked off the pavement, vanishing into thin air. The thought had me jittery.

Heading up to bed, I gave some more thought to the local police. It was common knowledge that the Vanderlinds always made a sizeable donation to the department during funding events. Every year they got complimentary tickets to the policemen’s ball, and every year there was a rumor that they were actually going to attend, but they never did. It all suddenly made sense to me. Of course the Vanderlinds would want Tiburon to be a nice, safe place to live. If there was a murder or a drug ring or a missing person, they didn’t want detectives and the FBI and whoever poking around and possibly unearthing a little too much of their history. It was a very smart move. The vampires were more invested in the town than I’d ever imagined.

I closed my bedroom door and then pulled Jessie’s tux jacket out of the closet, like I’d been doing each night for the past couple of nights. It was starting to lose his fragrance. I’d sniffed it too much, but I couldn’t help myself. I hung it by its hanger from a hook on the back of the closet door and then straightened the fabric so it lay perfectly. The jacket was probably suspended an inch or two too high, but very close to where it would have been if Jessie were wearing it.

Triple checking that the curtains to my room were closed and that my mom was still downstairs, I did what I did every night: put some music on the radio, closed my eyes, and slow danced with the tuxedo jacket. I knew I was being foolish, but I didn't care. It was the closest I could come to having his arms around me. Besides, a girl shouldn't be judged for the romantic foolishness she does alone in her room.

As I stood there, breathing in his faintly lingering scent, I felt almost hypnotized by the thought of him. We'd never danced, but it was like I could feel his strong arms around me, the faint warm penny smell of his breath, the look in his fathomless eyes.

How did I know his breath smelled like copper? I opened my eyes and considered. I guess it only made sense, given what he had to drink for dinner. That thought made me gag a little. I didn't even like dealing with a scrape on my knee. The thought of drinking human blood in order to live made my stomach churn.

Chapter 11

Mom came to school Friday afternoon during my lunch period to pick me up. We went to the police station, and I had to fill out a report. The perv hadn't physically accosted me or anything, but he had made threatening remarks and refused to give me access to my car. I was sure that in a big city, a perv harassing a high school girl wouldn't warrant a police report, but in Tiburon, it was taken seriously.

"What are you doing tonight?" Blossom asked me when we bumped into each other in the hallway between classes that afternoon. "Jimmy's cousin is in town, and he's totally gorgeous. We could double." Jimmy Stevens was Blossom's latest flame. A very recent flame. I think she decided she'd better reel it in a little after being drugged and spending the night unconscious. She'd been being extra nice to me ever since our escapade from the castle without actually bringing the whole thing up. I think she knew on some level she'd crossed a line with me. It wasn't so much that I didn't want to be friends with her anymore; I just needed a little break. Besides, going out with her would mean I couldn't dance with Jessie's jacket.

"Thanks, but I'm still pretty grounded," I told her. I wasn't grounded, of course, but she didn't know that.

I had all my homework for the weekend done by eight o'clock on Friday night. I was turning into a real party girl. Still, there were vampires out in the world, so I wasn't super excited about going out late at night.

Saturday, I worked the morning shift at Cup of Joe's, my humble part-time, minimum wage job. Mornings are always the busiest and when you're most likely to get a few tips. The steam from the cappuccino machine always sends my hair into overdrive, as far as curls are concerned. In the afternoon, I drove out to Ashtabula Care with Grandma

Gibson's photograph in an envelope and a plate full of ginger snaps. They were her favorite, and I wanted to thank her for lending me the photo.

"Aurora," she sang out when I poked my head through her door. "Come here, my girl. Let me look at you." She held her arms out to me from where she sat at her table, a deck of cards laid out in front of her.

"Hi, Grandma Gibson." I walked in and gave her a hug. I loved when she recognized me. It usually meant she was in a good mood.

"Always such a beauty," she said, touching my hair.

"Too bad none of the guys at my school think so," I said, blushing.

"Well, don't worry about them. Young boys are too foolish at your age to know what's good."

"I brought you some ginger snaps. Homemade," I told her, in part to distract her from talking about my continued failures at romance.

"You made me ginger snaps?" she asked, beaming. "Aren't you a sweet girl. Plug in my kettle, and we'll have a real tea party."

Ashtabula Care had rules against their residents having appliances—even hair dryers were illegal—but Grandma kept a contraband electric kettle so she could brew tea properly. I was pretty sure some of the nurses knew about it but were kind enough to look the other way. I pulled the kettle out from a hatbox in her closet and filled it with water from a plastic jug she had on the table.

"The blue cups, please, Aurora," Grandma told me. "And the tea things." She had a tea set of bone China and two different sets of cups and saucers, one blue with white and one green with pink flowers.

Once we were all set up with tea and snaps, I said to her, "I brought back your picture. Just like I said I would."

"What's that, now?" Grandma looked a little confused.

Fishing the envelope out of my bag, I handed to her. "Last time I was here, you lent me a photograph."

"Did I?" she frowned slightly, sliding the black and white from its envelope. "Ah, the castle. Yes, I can see why you'd be interested in it."

"Why's that?" I asked, taking a sip of the scalding hot tea.

"Don't you remember? You would ask me about it all the time when you were a little girl. I made the mistake of telling you once that I worked there for a few months, and then the questions never stopped."

"How old was I?" Her story barely rang the faintest of bells.

"Oh, I'd say from when you were three, then every time I saw you after that for at least a couple of years." That was before she had moved in with Mom and me.

"And what did you tell me about it?" I asked.

"As little as I could," she said, busying herself with stirring sugar into her tea.

"Why don't you like to talk about when you worked there?" I asked as gently as I could. She was having a good day, and I didn't want to ruin it.

"I just don't," she said firmly.

"Okay." I nodded, letting it drop. I tried to think back if there was anything I could dredge up out of my memory from when I was very little but came up with nothing. I may have asked her a zillion questions when I was younger, but I doubt she'd answered many.

Grandma spent some time looking at the photograph. I saw her blink hard a couple of times, and I wondered if she was upset. "Would you like me to put that back in the album for you, Grandma?" I asked. There was no reason to let her dwell.

"Would you, sweetheart?" She handed it to me. "And while you're up, you'd better hide the kettle. Lord knows I

don't want to get caught with it. They'd throw me out, and I'd have to sleep on a bench in the park."

It was late afternoon by the time I finished my visit with Grandma Gibson. She was getting tired, and I had formulated a new plan that I wanted to put into action immediately. While I was driving home, I stopped by a card shop. For a moment, I was tempted to get a card with an illustration of little boys playing basketball on the front that read, "Happy first birthday. You're number one!" but wasn't sure what vampires thought of offbeat humor. Eventually I decided on a blank card with two swans on the front gliding across a pond.

Back in my VW, I searched around the floorboards until I found a pen, then wrote in the most legible hand I could manage:

Dear Jessie,

Colette Gibson was my great grandmother's sister. She used to work at the castle and disappeared when she was a teenager back in 1935 or 36. Did you know her?

I spent a long time trying to decide how to sign off. I couldn't write *Love* or *Your friend* or *Best wishes*. Finally, I decided on

*Thinking of you,
Aurora*

As an afterthought, I wrote:

p.s. Don't you read books anymore?

I slid one of the copies of the Lillian-and-Colette-in-front-of-the-castle photo into the envelope along with the card and sealed it. On the outside, I wrote, *Mr. Jessie Vanderlind*.

By the time I was standing outside the Vanderlind Castle gate, it was dusk. I wondered if vampires could rise when there was still a little bit of light, or did they have to wait for nightfall.

"Are you lost or something, Miss?" a guard posted at the immense iron front gate asked as I got out of my car.

"Miss Aurora Keys to see Mr. Jessie Vanderlind," I told him. The guard was wearing the dark purple jacket with black pants, white shirt, and black tie.

"Sorry, Miss." He shook his head. "Mr. Vanderlind isn't expecting you."

"How do you know?" I asked. "Don't you have to call up to the house to check or something?"

"No need," the guard told me. "The Vanderlinds never expect anyone."

"Well, I have something for him," I said, extending the envelope through the bars. "It's just a photo that he asked me about. I told him I'd make him a copy."

The guard eyed the envelope suspiciously. "You spoke to Mr. Vanderlind about a photograph?" he asked. "And where did this happen?"

I met his incredulous look with a steady gaze. "At the library. He goes there on Thursday nights."

This time the guard nodded and accepted the card. "I'll see that he gets it."

"Thank you," I said, smiling at him before hopping back into my car and driving home.

Another endless week of trying to focus on anything but obsessing over Jessie. I was not a boy-crazy kind of girl. I liked guys, and I'd had crushes in the past, even a few short-lived relationships, but they were nothing like my attraction to Jessie. And I'd only met him briefly. It was maddening. I wanted him out of my head but frequently indulged in fantasizing about seeing him again. I dreamed about him every night and started keeping a dream journal next to my

bed. When I woke up, I would quickly write down every detail I could remember from my dream.

The dreams were frequently quite similar. Things kept happening at the same locations. It was like in the old movies where they'd use the same set over and over, just changing it slightly for the next film. Frequently, I found myself in the field of wildflowers. It was my point of accessing the field that shifted from night to night. Monday night, I had a variation of a dream that was familiar from childhood. I don't know why, but I've always had dreams that take place in libraries. Or maybe it's always the same library. It's hard to tell with just shelves upon shelves of books. I told Blossom about my book dreams once, and she said, "I wouldn't tell anyone else about that dream. That just proves you're a geek."

My newest version of the book dream had much more detail. I was in a very elegant library. One like you'd picture Mr. Darcy having in *Pride and Prejudice*. I was up on one of those sliding ladders libraries used to have, and I was doing something, although I'm not sure what. I had something in my hands, but I couldn't remember what it was once I woke up. Anyway, I was up there doing something but also kind of browsing through the books as I went. The library door opened, and in walked Jessie.

I was immediately embarrassed for some reason, like he could look up my skirt or something. But then he smiled at me, his eyes so kind that I felt a warm glow all over. He said something and then lifted his hand up as if to help me down from my perch, and then the dream got blurry, and I wasn't sure what happened after that.

Mr. Schwartzman stopped me on the way out of class on Tuesday. "What's going on with you?" he asked. "Everything okay at home?"

"Yeah. Fine. Why do you ask?"

"Well, your homework has been excellent; you're in class on time; you pay attention; you even volunteered to answer

a few questions today. It's got me wondering what's come over you. Not that I'm complaining, just wondering. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's good," I told him. "Just trying to be a little more serious about getting into a good college. I can show up late tomorrow, if that would make you feel better."

He chuckled. "No, that's okay. Just wanted you to know, I'm impressed. Keep it up."

Thursday evening, I drove to the library and stationed myself in the same chair I had occupied the week before. I felt pretty confident that Jessie wasn't going to walk through the door, but I kept a lookout anyway. At a quarter to nine, I headed out to my car while there were still plenty of people around and cars in the parking lot. I was not a complete idiot. I could usually learn from my mistakes. But I didn't drive away. I sat in my VW with the windows rolled up and the doors locked. By ten minutes after nine, the parking lot was empty and the lights to the library were off. I rolled down the VW's window a few inches and said in a clear voice, "I still have your jacket."

Nothing happened. There was a slight rustling in some nearby trees, but that was it.

"I also have your watch," I called.

I heard the flapping of fabric and then suddenly there he was, standing next to my car. Jessie gave a small but amused sigh then bent at the waist to look in at me through the driver's side window. "You never give up, do you?" the vampire said with a grin, his fangs on full display.

Chapter 12

I couldn't believe it. Everything was going according to plan. Jessie was there, standing next to my car. He was in dark suit pants with a white shirt and dark tie. Over his arm, he'd folded his suit jacket like a model in a catalogue. I was frozen in my seat. I'd so desperately wanted to see him, but on some level, I was also afraid. He was, after all, a vampire. "I have your jacket," I finally managed to stutter. "I thought you might want it back."

"Keep it," he shrugged. "I've already had it replaced."

My heart sang with the knowledge that the jacket was mine. "What about your watch?" I asked.

"Yes, that is something I would like returned."

I took a deep breath. Here came the part of my plan that was going to be the most challenging to execute. "I'll trade you for it."

He let out a small laugh and then gave me an incredulous look. I knew I had said something he wasn't expecting. "It doesn't have much value, if that's what you mean," he said. "I only want it for sentimental reasons."

"I know," I told him.

His handsome face appeared a little angry as he looked in the VW at me. "And what exactly do you want in exchange for my property?"

"I want the answers to one hundred questions."

Again, his handsome face showed surprise. "You want what?"

"I will give you back your watch, and in return, I want you to answer one hundred of my questions."

That was when he really started to laugh quite heartily. "You're holding my watch for ransom until I answer your questions?"

"No, you can have your watch back, of course," I said, feeling embarrassed. "I just... I just wanted to talk to you. Just to see you again. And I have so many questions that I want to ask you. I hope you're not mad."

He had his arm outstretched with his palm against the car so he could lean over and talk to me at eye level with some degree of comfort. "You are quite charming, did you know that?"

"My mother calls me determined."

"Charmingly determined," Jessie amended.

"So, do we have a deal?" I wanted to know.

He rubbed a finger across his lower lip. "I really shouldn't agree," he said, but I could tell he was considering it.

"I'll just keep trying to find ways to talk to you."

Jessie sighed. "I'm really not used to you modern girls, but you have yourself a deal. Besides, I have a few questions of my own."

"Really?" I gulped. It was my turn to be surprised. Maybe he did have feelings for me like I did for him. Or did he just want to know about Lettie's family?

"Mostly about your great grandmother," he admitted.

"Oh." I was disappointed, but I couldn't have everything, and he had agreed to talk to me. "So how do we do this?" I asked, quickly following it up with, "And that doesn't count as question number one."

"Is there anywhere at your house where I could sit outside while you stay inside? An awning or a ledge or a terrace or something?"

"We've got a back porch," I suggested.

He lifted his eyebrows a little. "Is it screened?"

I shook my head.

"Then that's no good. Can you think of anything on the second floor? I'd prefer to be up high, if possible."

"There's a roof over the porch that actually comes up to my bedroom window. It's pretty sturdy. I tan out there sometimes."

“Perfect. I’ll see you there.” And then he was gone. He didn’t exactly evaporate or anything; he just moved so quickly that, in the dark, it was hard for my eyes to follow him. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but I thought maybe he rose up into the air.

I drove about two blocks before I got the shakes so bad I had to pull over. What was I doing? I’d just invited an admitted vampire to meet me at my house. That was insane. I had gone completely insane. For almost two weeks, I had done nothing but obsess over Jessie. And once I had his attention, I was freaking out because there was a good chance he might kill me.

But I didn’t really think that would happen. Not really. I mean, he fought Viktor to save me and told me how to escape the castle and sent Viggo to help me because he knew I wouldn’t leave Blossom behind. Those are all things someone does because they want you to be alive and happy, not dead and drained of all your blood.

I could blow him off and go hide at Blossom’s for the rest of the night. I knew immediately that would never work. He could still find me whenever he wanted me, and breaking a date with a vampire probably wasn’t a healthy idea. And what if I didn’t meet him? What then? Would I ever be able to push away all the questions that were filling my brain? Would I ever get another good night’s sleep? Would I be forever condemned to being a straight A student just to keep my head clear of thoughts of him? No, no matter how frightened I was, I had come this far. I had to meet him. I had to talk to him. Not speaking to him had been torture enough.

I pulled into the garage and made sure no one was in there with me before I closed the door and got out of the car. Mom greeted me from the living room where she was enjoying a bowl of popcorn and watching TV. “Want to join me?” she asked. “There’s a John Hughes marathon on.”

“What’s on now?” I asked, just to appear interested.

“*Beethoven’s 2nd.*”

I made a face. She knew I really didn't like movies about big, slobbery dogs. "I've still got some homework to finish up. If they show *Breakfast Club*, record it for me, and we'll watch it tomorrow."

"Okay." She went back to her snacking.

Upstairs, I went into the bathroom first to give my hair a quick brush and to freshen my lip gloss. I didn't usually wear a lot of makeup on a daily basis, but I felt it was a good time to throw on some eyeliner and a bit of blush.

Feeling spruced, I headed for my bedroom, my legs trembling a bit beneath me. I opened my window and looked out. The porch roof was empty. He wasn't there. My heart plummeted into my belly.

He came from the sky, descending as gently as a snowflake. Jessie simply floated down from nowhere, landing with no more sound than a cat made leaping on a bed. "Hello," he said, giving me a shy smile.

"Hi," I said. "How did you know where I lived?"

He countered with, "How did you know I was at the library?"

"I asked you first."

He went to answer, but then paused. "Does this count as question number one?"

"No," I told him.

I started to climb out onto the roof to join him when he stopped me with, "Don't come out here," sounding quite urgent.

"Why not?" I frowned. "I'm pretty sure it's strong enough to hold both of us."

"That's not it," he told me. "I asked to meet you here so you could stay inside your house. As long as you don't come out, I can't get to you."

I decided to ignore the "I can't get to you" comment and pushed ahead with, "So, it's true about vampires? I have to invite you in?"

Jessie sighed, his broad chest sagging just a little as if he was somehow giving in to something he had been struggling against. "Daniel would stake me if he knew I was doing this," he mumbled to himself. Then he walked over to the window and settled on the roof a few feet away from where I knelt. "Yes, it's true, and I'm counting that as your first question."

"That's a rip-off," I informed him. "You're like a genie swindling me out of my three wishes."

He flashed a boyish grin. His hair was ruffled, probably from flying around in the middle of the night, I assumed, and he looked more handsome than ever. Becoming quite serious, he said, "You know you can never tell anyone about all this, right?"

"I know," I assured him. "Besides, who would I tell? No one would believe me."

"Good, then what other questions do you have?"

"What happened to that creepy guy who was harassing me in the library parking lot?" I asked.

He tried to squirm out of it with, "What guy?" but I leveled him with a look and shook my head to let him know I wasn't buying it. "Fine," he capitulated. "I flew him out into the country, then took him very high over a cornfield and let him drop."

"You didn't."

"I caught him before he hit the ground," he assured me. "And then I made it very clear that if he valued his life, he was never to harass, threaten, or intimidate another female ever again." Jessie folded his hands and hooked them over one knee. "Then I gave him a little money and told him to go start a new life somewhere far, far away, but that I'd be watching him no matter where he went."

"He must have been terrified," I gasped.

"He seemed to be," Jessie said, with much satisfaction. "But I hate men like that, getting his jollies out of frightening women. It's so ungentlemanly."

I had to laugh. "That's quite something, coming from a vampire."

Jessie cocked his head to one side to get a better look at my face. "Why aren't you afraid of me?" he asked.

"Who says I'm not?"

"I do," he insisted. "You don't seem to be afraid of me at all."

"I wouldn't say that," I assured him. "But I am less afraid of you than I probably should be. I mean, you did save me from drowning and from that pervy vampire who wanted to drink from Blossom and a couple more times. In general, you've saved my life more than you seem to threaten it."

"Just don't trust me, okay? I mean, not completely. Because I don't." It was dark in our backyard, and I couldn't make out all of him clearly, but there was a little ambient lighting from the streetlight on the corner, and I could see the expression on his handsome face. He looked anxious, afraid, but I could tell it was not for himself.

I nodded my consent, and we sat there in silence for a few moments. "How did you become a vampire?" I finally asked.

"It wasn't that hard. I come from a vampire family."

"You..." I thought over his words. I wanted to say, *What?* but that was a question, so instead I said, "I don't understand. I thought you had to be bitten to become a vampire. I didn't know it ran in families."

"Vampirism runs in families, but it isn't hereditary," he explained. "Usually, one member of a family becomes a vampire. And then, when he figures out that eventually everyone he's ever loved will die and he will just keep on living, he sometimes turns the people he is closest to. And then there's a chance those people will go and do the same thing. In some families, it happens generation after generation; in others, the people are less selfish, and the vampirism doesn't spread beyond the first group infected or even the first person infected."

I thought about what he'd said. If he was being truthful, and I had no reason to doubt him, keeping a vampire family going for more than a generation would take a lot of family planning. Careful not to form a question, I said, "Your family probably goes back a couple of generations."

Jessie laughed. "I see what you're doing," he informed me, "and some of these have to count as questions."

"Okay, fine. I don't understand. How does it work? Can vampires even have children? I'm probably just getting this from legends and movies and stuff, but I did think you could. How did your family become a vampire family?" I mentally kicked myself for not being more concise. I'd asked three questions when I could have just asked one.

"No, we can't have children once we've turned," he said with a sigh. "As far as my family, my grandfather was made a vampire back in the eighteen-seventies. He was twenty-four at the time, but he already had two daughters and a son. Because he came from a wealthy family, he was able to secure blood without arousing too many suspicions." I was about to say something, but Jessie cut me off with, "I'm not saying he didn't kill people. I'm just saying his position in society allowed him to kill selectively. People who wouldn't be missed. When my mom was still almost still a girl, he forced her into an arranged marriage with a wealthy businessman. She had two boys and a girl. Then, when she turned twenty-four, he turned her. He did the same with both her siblings. My uncle made it through, but my aunt died during transformation."

"What about your dad?" I ventured to ask.

Jessie shook his head. "Once there were heirs and my mother was turned, there was no more use for him."

"Oh," I said, not really knowing what else to say.

"Grandfather was a cruel and selfish man. He bullied my mom into turning my brother when he was twenty-four, even though he and his wife never had any children."

I made sure not to ask what happened to the wife. "What about you? You're not twenty-four." He looked as seventeen as any kid in my class, only better dressed.

"No, there was an outbreak of scarlet fever when I was seventeen, and I came down with a bad case of it. We were living in Hungary at the time. Hitler was starting to make trouble in Europe, and my grandfather saw the signs. He had just finished shipping the castle to America to be rebuilt and was eager to get away. We'd already booked passage on a steamship and everything. My mom offered to stay behind and nurse me through, but Grandfather didn't trust her. He knew she would try to spare me the fate of the Vanderlinds if she could. So he turned me."

"But you didn't have any children," I said.

"No, and neither did my brother. My sister was younger than me, so my grandfather intended to force her to have a large family."

"What happened?"

"While we were crossing the Atlantic, my grandfather was discovered feasting on a cabin boy. The other passengers were horrified and threw him overboard in the middle of the ocean. We never saw him again."

"Didn't the passengers come after you, then? I mean, you were his family."

"No, my mother had insisted that we all book passage under different names and then pretend not to know each other during the voyage. That way, if one of us was caught, the others would be safe."

"She sounds very smart."

"She is very smart," he smiled. "Smarter than my grandfather, at least that one time." In response to my questioning look, he replied, "She's the one that sent in the cabin boy."

I was horrified. Not that she wanted to get rid of her own father, he sounded like a monster, but that she would sacrifice a child. Reading my face, Jessie quickly added, "The

boy lived, in case you were wondering. And when we arrived in America, it was discovered that a distant relative he never knew existed had left him a bit of money, so he was able to leave his maritime ways and go to school. He became an engineer."

"Where is your sister?" I asked. I had met his brother, Daniel, at the party.

"She died of old age many years ago. My mother never turned her."

"Wow," was all I could manage for several seconds. "And here I thought my family was screwed up, but we just have the basic Dad-leaves-Mom-for-a-younger-woman thing going on."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jessie said. He made a gesture like he was going to reach through the open window and squeeze my hand, but then withdrew. I didn't know if that was because I was on the inside of the house or because he just thought better of it.

"It sucks, but there's nothing I can do about it." I tried to play it off like it was no big deal, but my voice was a little quavery so he probably didn't believe me. I hated thinking about my dad.

"The Bronte Family were vampires," he said casually, but I knew it was to get my mind off my father.

This left me so stunned that I forgot to avoid asking questions. "You mean the writers? *Wuthering Heights*? *Jane Eyre*? Those Brontes?" Jessie nodded, but I still couldn't take it in. "I thought they all died of consumption."

"Actually, one of them was a vampire. I'm not sure which one; either Branwell or Charlotte would be my best guess. Anyway, someone in the family became a vampire and started turning the others. Most of the sisters were pretty devout. Once they discovered that they were the undead, they refused to eat and slowly starved to death."

"Oh, my God. That can happen?" I was surprised, although I don't know why.

"It used to happen quite frequently," he assured me.

It was challenging to summon up the courage to ask my next question, but I knew I had to. "How do you eat?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"We have blood drives," he replied in a matter-of-fact voice.

"You do not."

"We do," he insisted.

"How is that even possible?"

"Well, that's where coming from old money really pays off." Jessie shifted his position to hook his folded hands over his other knee. "A subsidiary of one of our corporations arranges blood drives all over the country. Most of the blood goes to hospitals that need it, but a portion goes to us vampires, who also need it."

"But that's dishonest," I said, frowning. People thought they were doing good by donating blood. Not supplying food for the undead.

"I know," Jessie agreed. "But we keep a lot of vampires from being hungry and, believe me, you do not want a world full of hungry vampires."

I shivered, remembering the crazed look in Viktor's eyes. "You're probably right."

There was a gentle knock at my bedroom door. "Aurora?" my mom said, before opening it. There was just us two females in the house, so we walked into each other's room all the time.

"Uh, hi, Mom," I said, getting to my feet.

"What are you up to?" she asked, stepping into the room.

"Nothing," I told her. "Just looking out the window."

"I thought I heard you talking to someone." My mom glanced around the room like she expected to see someone's shoes peeking out from under the drapes.

"Nope, just me," I said. "I was practicing my Spanish vocabulary. Maybe that's what you heard."

“Maybe.” She didn’t look convinced. After a moment, she added, “Anyway, I’m headed to bed. Goodnight, sweetie. I love you.”

“Goodnight, Mom. Love you, too.”

After she closed the door, I turned to look back out the window, but the roof was empty. Jessie was gone.

Chapter 13

The disappointment I felt that Jessie had left was staggering. It was as if someone was squeezing my heart. But why? I couldn't explain it to myself. It wasn't like I hadn't had hot guys blow me off before. Or even not so hot guys. Freshman year, I had a date actually ditch me at a school dance. Now that was humiliating. But I had so much been enjoying my conversation with Jessie. Not only because it was fascinating, but because I felt good being near him.

It took three hours of thrashing around in my bed with the sheets twisting around my legs before I was able to fall asleep. Even then, I didn't get any rest. I had a horrible nightmare, one I used to have all the time when I was a little girl but that fortunately went away for the most part when I hit puberty.

In my dream, it was dark—the pitch black of night. I was barefoot and running as fast as my legs could carry me through some type of wooded area. My lungs ached from the exertion, and there was a strong stitch in my side which I was pressing on with my hand in order to keep going. Something was after me. I wasn't sure if it was a man or a beast. Maybe something that was a bit of both. Either way, it had long, sharp teeth that were eager to tear into my flesh.

At some point, I stumbled and fell. Too exhausted to go any further, I tried to hide behind a log and quiet my ragged breathing as much as possible. There was a moment of pure silence, when all the creatures of the night ceased to sing their lullabies. And then the creature was on me, grabbing me, forcing me down, pushing my head back. I tried to scream, but I couldn't. I tried to fight him, but my blows were sluggish like I was punching through water. I knew I was going to die, and there was nothing I could do about it. The creature was delighted by my terror, laughing and

mocking my fright. Just as it was lowering its head to tear out my throat, I saw them, its eyes, the animal's dead, gray eyes.

I woke with a shriek as my radio alarm clock started blasting me with information about the weather. It took a few seconds of thrashing around to realize I was alone in my room; it was morning, and it was going to be a beautiful day.

"What are you doing tonight?" Blossom asked over burgers and fries. Juniors and seniors are allowed to leave campus for lunch on Fridays, so we decided to indulge in a little fast food. Before I could swallow the bite I had just taken, she added, "And don't tell me you're still grounded because I won't believe you."

"Nope, I'm on parole," I told her. I actually was going to re-use the grounded excuse, but she anticipated me. "Why, is Jimmy's cousin still in town?"

"No, he's gone. And you totally missed out," she informed me. "Completely hot."

"My loss," I said, dipping a fry in ketchup.

"But the three of us could hang out. Jimmy would be totally cool about it."

I tried not to roll my eyes.

"So...?" she said, waiting expectantly. "Do you want to do something? Are we best friends or not?"

"Don't give me that crap," I told her. "You know we're best friends. I've just been focused on other stuff lately. Besides, hanging around while Jimmy Stevens tries to jam his tongue down your throat isn't exactly my idea of a good time."

"Oh, come on," she said. "It won't be like that."

I leveled her with a look. "Blossom, I've been a third wheel on your dates enough times to know that's exactly what it'll be like."

"Okay, fine," she relented. "What if I ditch Jimmy?"

I'd known Blossom for way too long to think that was ever going to happen when she was in the throes of boyfriend

madness. "Why don't we do a bake-a-thon on Sunday? I could look up some new cookie recipes," I suggested, instead.

"Fine," she grumbled. "But you're being such a drip lately."

I knew I could get Blossom off my back with the call of the chocolate chips. We both had a ridiculous sweet tooth; mine just revealed itself around my hips a bit more than Blossom's. The truth was I wanted to be home in hopes that Jessie would return. I still had his watch, and I hadn't asked him anything close to a hundred questions, so I figured there was a good chance.

At school, I started taking on a lot of extra credit work in all of my classes. My grades were improving by leaps and bounds, but I needed more work to keep me from obsessing over Jessie. And to forget my dream from the night before. I'd had that nightmare hundreds of times as a child, but there had never been the eyes. I hated that my brain had decided to add that alarming detail.

That evening, Mom and I watched *The Breakfast Club* like we'd planned. It's one of the few teen movies I'd ever seen where I preferred the jock over the bad boy. Although, I did find it weird how, in most Hollywood movies, girls are encouraged to like boys who are obviously not good for them. Or at least, they wouldn't be good for them in real life. I had no room to talk. I was obsessing over a vampire.

I couldn't concentrate on the movie. I kept thinking I heard someone landing on the roof, so I kept running upstairs under the excuse of needing the bathroom. After my third trip, Mom said, "Are you feeling okay? You don't have a bladder infection or anything, do you?"

"No, I'm fine," I told her. "I just had a salty lunch and chugged a bunch of water earlier."

"Then why aren't you using the downstairs bathroom?"

Oops! She'd noticed. "I uh..." My brain went scrambling. "I read an article that said you should always use the

upstairs bathroom so that you have to climb the stairs every time. Get a little more exercise.”

“Oh.” She thought about it. “I guess that’s kind of a good idea. I might do that.”

We’d started the movie early, so it was over by eight-thirty. “Do you want to watch *Pretty in Pink*?” Mom asked as she deleted the first film from our DVR.

“Maybe tomorrow,” I told her, getting up. “I’ve got a book I want to read.”

“Oh, really?” Mom looked up from what she was doing. “What are you reading?”

“Uh...” I had to start remembering that moms always have a follow-up question. It’s their way of showing they’re interested in your life. “*The Grapes of Wrath*,” I hazarded. It was the first title that popped into my brain.

“Oh. Yeah.” She nodded. “I had to read that in high school. I’ve got to warn you, it’s good, but it gets pretty darn depressing.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling. “I’m warned.” We fought sometimes, just like everyone else and their parents, but I really did have a nice mom. I felt pretty lucky about it.

Upstairs, I headed for the bathroom again to check my hair and add some lip balm to my smile. I didn’t know if I was more nervous about seeing Jessie or having him blow me off. He might never show up again, I told myself, even if he still wanted his watch. Remembering that I really should return it to him, I got it out of the pocket of his tux jacket then went over to my bedroom window and opened it.

There was a shadowy figure sitting on the edge of the porch roof, his legs dangling over the side, his head bent down. He immediately turned to look at me when he heard the window slide open. My heart sang in my chest. He was there! He was there! I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. “Uh... hello?” I began.

Jessie got to his feet as graceful as a jungle cat and moved closer to the window. “Good evening,” he said,

smiling at me, his face so brutally handsome it made me want to gasp. "Did you have a good day? Was there sunshine?" He settled again a few feet away from the window. "I have to confess, I do miss the sunshine."

"It was nice," I managed to tell him, although I was very unsure of my voice. There really should have been a law against being so good looking.

"So, how many questions did you ask me yesterday? A couple dozen, I think."

"Not even close," I protested. "Three at the most. Maybe four."

He chuckled. "I think you might be trying to lowball me. I remember at least ten, if not twelve."

He was teasing me! I felt all rosy on the inside. "I'll agree to six, but no more," I informed him. "And you're getting the better end of the deal."

"Fine, I agree. But in concession, I have a few questions of my own."

I shrugged. "Go ahead." My life wasn't nearly as interesting as his, but if he felt he needed to know a few things, I was an open book.

"I was wondering if..." and then he stopped.

"What?" I wanted to know.

"Nothing. I'm just being an idiot."

We sat there in silence for a few minutes. He was contemplative, and I didn't want to intrude. I was happy just being with him. I wanted to soak in every second.

"I want to thank you for this," he finally said, gesturing toward something he was holding in his hand. I hadn't noticed before, but he had the laser copy photo of the castle I had given him. He must have been looking at it when I opened the window. "You look so much like her, it's remarkable," he went on, gazing at the photo and then back up at me. "When I first saw you in the library, I couldn't believe it. For a moment I thought..." his words faded on his

lips. After a long pause, he turned his face away and said in a bitter whisper, "But I know that's impossible."

"What do you know about Colette Gibson?" I asked.

"That's funny," he said, with a small, bitter laugh. "That's the same question I was going to ask you."

"She was my Grandma Gibson's sister," I told him.

"What is your grandmother's name?"

"Great grandmother, actually, and it's Lillian."

"Lilly's still alive?" he said in a wondering voice, mostly to himself.

"Did you know her?"

"Yes, of course. Colette and Lillian were two of our first housemaids after we moved the castle from Hungary. Of course, that was back when we thought there wouldn't be any harm in hiring staff from the town."

"Why did you stop?" I wanted to know.

"That was my fault," he said, hanging his head. "I was so young and foolish back then."

"I don't believe that. What did you do?" I asked in a gentle voice.

"It was me that..." he began. "I was the one..." He stopped a second time. With a heavy sigh, he finally said, "I can't tell you right now. I'm too ashamed. Would it be all right if I waited to tell?"

"Of course," I replied, although my curiosity was piqued. "Should I ask you something else instead?"

He nodded. "Please."

"What was your party all about when we snuck into the castle? Was it a birthday party or something?"

"Kind of." Jessie still looked a little uncomfortable. "It was my maker's day."

My instant impulse was to ask, "What's that?" but instead I just waited with an expectant look on my face.

"It's kind of a misnomer, but in vampire culture, a maker's day is the day you were turned into a vampire," he

explained. "You celebrate it sort of like a birthday with a party and presents, but there's a lot more blood."

I suppressed a shiver. "How old are you?"

"That was my eightieth maker's day," he said with a sigh.

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe the creature sitting just a few feet away from me, who looked and acted every bit as young as any boy in my school, was ninety-seven years old. I put my hand to my cheek and just stared at him. "Wow."

He ducked his head. "Yeah, well, I moisturize."

I couldn't think of what to say, and I couldn't keep staring at him like he was a sideshow exhibit. Finally, I settled on, "What kind of presents do you get on a maker's day?"

"It's pretty obnoxious. Everyone always tries to bring the most ostentatious gift to prove they are the most generous. Kind of like a potlatch for vampires."

I made a mental note to google *potlatch* when I had a free moment.

"The thing is, everybody's so old, they sometimes forget who gave them what after a couple of decades, so there's a lot of re-gifting," he said, laughing. "You wouldn't believe some of the gaudy jewelry that showed up."

This made me instantly annoyed. With all the struggling people in the world, he was complaining about ugly, expensive presents. "Poor baby," I cooed like I was speaking to a child. "Does the widdle vampire get too many expensive presents?"

"Of course, there is some pretty stuff too," he said, looking a bit sheepish. "Would you like a couple of pieces?"

"What?" I sputtered. He had caught me by surprise. "No, that's not what I meant. I just..." I felt flustered that he'd misunderstood me. "I meant you should sell the stuff, if it's so ugly, and give the money to charity or something."

"I'm sorry." Jessie pulled back a few inches creating a bit more distance between us. "I didn't mean to insult you. Are you offended?"

"No, I'm not offended," I assured him, lightening my tone. "I'm just not used to vampires offering me jewelry. Or anyone offering me jewelry, for that matter." I'd never actually received any kind of gift from a boy, and my mom couldn't afford to get me anything beyond a simple gold chain.

"I didn't mean to sound so bourgeois," he told me.

"No, I'm sorry I teased you. We just live in very different worlds."

After a moment's reflection he said, "I could look through the things and see if there's anything I think would suit you. If you don't like it, then you don't have to keep it." He made the offer in a very offhanded way.

I was a little dumbfounded. It probably wasn't good manners to try to shake a vampire down for jewels, but a part of me desperately wanted something. Not so much to have a valuable present, but to have a gift from him, a token to hold and think of him. And it was only right to give back his watch. "Okay," I said in a small voice. "As long as it's something, you know, not valuable."

For some reason, this made Jessie smile. "Do you have more questions for me tonight?"

"Only about a million," I told him.

"Well, then I feel sorry for you because you only have about eighty left."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Try ninety."

Jessie waved a hand at me. "Proceed."

"Okay... uh..." I did have a zillion questions but somehow, sitting so close to him, almost all of them flew out of my head. I forced my brain to focus. "At the party, there were goblets with blood and then coupe glasses with champagne." He nodded, so I kept going, "That means there were both vampires and humans at your party. Who were the humans, and how did they get invited?"

"They were companions," he said simply. I said nothing, just waited patiently for him to continue. "There are humans

out there who want to be part of the vampire world. Or they fall in love with a vampire or become obsessed with our culture in some way. Anyway, sometimes a vampire will take on a human as a companion."

"So a companion is a vampire's human boyfriend or girlfriend?"

"No, it's not quite like that." The way Jessie said the words, I could tell he was uncomfortable.

"So, what is it like?" I pressed.

"It's more like... um... it's more like..." he searched for the right words. "The vampire takes care of the companion with food and clothing and a place to live and sometimes even a little money. And in exchange, the companion allows the vampire to feed from her or him."

I thought about it. "So, kind of like a servant then."

Jessie nodded. "In a way."

"Or a pet."

"No," he said a bit too quickly. "It's not like that."

"But the human is frequently in love with the vampire, and the vampire just thinks of the human as a walking snack bag."

Jessie had the good grace to look slightly ashamed. "You're right. I'm afraid that happens quite a bit of the time."

"Does the vampire have sex with the human?" I asked. I knew a judgmental tone was creeping into my voice, but I couldn't suppress it.

"Aurora," he went to reach for my hand, but then stopped himself again. Dropping his arm, Jessie huffed in frustration. "I don't have a companion; I have never had a companion; and I am not trying to make you my companion," he said in a very firm voice. "Are we clear on this?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing," Jessie insisted. "You asked me a question, and I answered it. I didn't say I condoned companionism. Please don't judge me by the acts of others."

He was right. I had been judging him. But the companion thing just sounded so creepy. "I'm sorry."

"Well, I'm sorry I upset you. Most vampires don't live their lives with consideration for humans in mind."

"Neither do a lot of humans," I observed dryly.

The evening's conversation wasn't going very well. I'd asked Jessie to tell me about his world and then got mad at him for the details. That wasn't very fair. And I didn't want to fight with him. All I did when Jessie wasn't around was think about him or try not to think about him.

"It's getting late. I should probably get going," he said, moving his legs underneath him so he could get to his feet.

My heart sank. "You're leaving?"

"I'm afraid so," Jessie replied. "Besides, I'm sure you need your sleep."

I knew it would do no good to try to persuade him to stay. And it was probably best that things ended right then although my heart was wildly protesting otherwise. "Thanks for coming to see me," I managed.

"My pleasure," he replied. He turned to go.

"Jessie?"

"Yes?" he turned quickly back to me.

I just wanted to see his beautiful face one more time. "Don't forget your watch," I said, extending the timepiece out the window for him to take.

He automatically reached for it, his fingertips lightly grazing the base of my thumb. I involuntarily shuddered as an electric tingle ran up my spine, and he pulled his hand away. "That's okay. You keep it for now," he said.

"But..."

"I want an excuse to see you again," he said with a devilish chuckle, his eyes twinkling. "Even when you've run out of questions."

The next thing I knew, he had evaporated into the night.

Chapter 14

“He wants to see me again.” My heart sang as I twirled around my room, the arms of Jessie’s tuxedo jacket wrapped around my waist in a simulated embrace.

“Aurora?” My mom tapped at my door.

“Just a minute, Mom,” I called back, leaping to my closet and stashing the jacket inside.

“What are you doing in there?” she asked, once I’d opened the door.

“Uh... dancing?” I confessed.

“By yourself?” She glanced around my room. “You don’t even have any music on.”

“I know. I was just goofing around.”

“Okay...” Mom said, although I could tell she wasn’t fully satisfied with my answer. “You’ve been spending a lot of time in your room lately. Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. Fine,” I told her.

“Are you fighting with Blossom or something?” she pressed.

“No, not exactly fighting,” I said. “Blossom’s got a new boyfriend, so... you know how that goes.”

“Oh.” My mom bobbed her head in understanding. “Got it.”

As usual, I couldn’t sleep, so I took the notebook I’d been using as my dream journal and flipped to the back. There I started writing down everything Jessie had told me about his world. After about an hour, my eyelids started to droop, and I turned off the light.

I was in the forest again, but this time it was daylight, and I wasn’t frightened. Not at all. In fact, I was blissfully happy. Everything surrounding me was very green and lush. Birds were hopping around in the trees, and butterflies wafted past. I was with someone I adored, and he adored

me. Our faces were so close together that, whenever I tried to look at him, I couldn't see his whole face, I could only see his eyes. They were gray and beautiful, and they twinkled sometimes when he smiled. This time they were not filled with hate, but a much happier emotion. I wondered if it was love. Even though I wasn't afraid, there was something unusual about the eyes. My dream shifted, and the eyes became distorted in a way I couldn't quite figure out. The gray color was uncommon, that was for sure, but there was something else that was puzzling me. I began to focus on just one of his eyes, and it became larger and larger in a way that only makes sense in dreams, but still there was something odd. Finally, it came to me. Besides being magnified, his eye was inverted. I was somehow viewing it upside down. Then the dream shifted again, and everything went back to normal.

None of it made any sense to me, but I woke up in an excessively good mood. I quickly wrote down everything I could remember in my dream journal / vampire log and headed down for breakfast.

Mom looked up from her coffee as I entered the kitchen. "What have you got planned today?"

"I don't know," I told her as I hunted for cereal.

"I was thinking we could visit Grandma Gibson and then maybe do a bit of shopping."

Mom had set a good trap. I actually wasn't feeling up to a Grandma Gibson run, but the temptation to go shopping was strong. "This is going to sound awful," I said, "but do we have to do the Grandma Gibson part?" I saw the hurt look on my mother's face and quickly added, "I've visited her twice in the past two weeks, you know."

"I know, honey. And I thought that was very sweet of you," she said. "But I wanted to spend some time with you, and I really owe her a visit."

"Okay," I relented. "I'm in." The guilt I would feel from not going wasn't worth the mild inconvenience of going.

Besides, if I was in an old age home, I'd want my family to visit me as much as possible. The least I could do was suck it up and go see my great grandmother for an hour a week.

As we signed in, the lady at the front desk said, "Oh, I'm so glad some of Lillian's family is coming to see her today. She woke up this morning and, I don't know, she's really been having a hard time." Not exactly what I was hoping to hear. Grandma Gibson had been pretty lucid during my last visit.

It started as soon as we walked into the room. Mom tried to be cheerful with, "Hello, Grams. It's me—Helen." I hung back in the doorway, but Mom walked straight into the room.

As usual, Grandma Gibson was at her table, a deck of cards laid out in rows before her. "Helen?" she said, sounding confused.

"That's right, Grammy," Mom replied. "And look who's back to see you—Aurora." Mom gestured for me to actually enter the room.

When Grandma Gibson saw me, her eyes grew wide. "Lettie," she gasped. "Where have you been? You didn't go to meet *him* again, did you?" Her whole body was tense, her hands quaking over the cards.

My mother looked at me and almost imperceptibly shook her head. Picking up on her cue, I stepped closer and said, "Of course not, Gra... uh... Lilly. I didn't meet him. It's over between us. I'm never going to see him again."

My words seemed to calm Grandma, and she became a little less rigid in her chair. "I'm so happy to hear you say that. I know he's handsome, and I know he's rich, but he's evil. They all are. The whole family are creatures from hell."

I opened my mouth to speak but then choked back the words because my impulse was to shout, "You're wrong. He's not evil. He's wonderful. You just don't understand him." I had managed to stop myself but just barely. My mom would think I was nuts, but in all likelihood, Grandma and I would

be talking about the same person. This realization made me feel a little sick to my stomach.

"It's a beautiful day today," my mother interjected. "Would you like to sit outside for a while?"

There were tears in Grandma Gibson's eyes. She reached out to me. "Come hold my hand, Lettie, and let me look at you. I'm so glad you're safe."

"Well, that was interesting," Mom said to me when the visit was over and we'd climbed into the car. "I'm sorry she was so stressful today, but I'm really proud of the way you handled it."

And then I was crying.

"Oh, sweetie," my mom said, wrapping her arms around me. "I'm sorry if she made you feel bad. She's just old and confused most of the time. You just happen to remind her of her sister. Being nice to her and assuring her that you wouldn't meet whatever guy Lettie eventually ran off with was probably the kindest thing you could ever do for her."

"Do you think Lettie lived?" I managed to choke out between sobs. "I mean, do you think she just ran away and got married, or do you think something happened to her?"

"I don't know, honey." My mom petted my hair. "I'd like to think she eloped."

"Then why didn't she ever talk to her family again? Why didn't she ever visit?"

"I don't know. Maybe she thought she wouldn't be forgiven."

"But Grandma misses her so much. Lettie's been gone for like seventy years, and Grandma still worries about her. It's just so horrible."

"That's why it's so wonderful when you visit," Mom told me. "She gets to see Lettie again. I know it's hard on you, but it's such a wonderful gift." She popped the glove box and rooted around for some tissues.

"I know," I said, my words muffled by the tissue she handed me as I wiped my nose. "It's just hard, sometimes. It really freaks me out."

"Well, what do you say to ice cream for lunch?" Mom put on her seatbelt. "I think having to pretend to be the ghost of Lettie Gibson warrants a little calorie fest."

A huge part of me wanted to tell my mother the truth of why I was so upset. And in my old reality, that would have been the right thing to do. But the supernatural factor had me confused. If I started telling my mom about vampires at the castle, she would probably have me psychologically evaluated rather than helping me unravel my feelings for someone who was obviously dangerous.

"A calorie fest sounds great," I managed to say as I tried to reel in my emotions. "Sorry I got all weepy. It just scares me thinking about what might have happened to Lettie."

"Don't I know it." Mom backed the car out of the parking spot. "Every week, I think about switching over to some less emotionally taxing work. Let someone else tackle the tough stuff and just grab something with better pay. Become a cog in middle management somewhere."

"Why don't you?" I asked, not because I thought she should, but just out of curiosity.

"Because there are a lot of girls out there like Lettie, who need someone to turn to when they get in a tight spot. Or need someone to count on when things go wrong. Someone to help them make sense of their lives and move forward. In a weird way, Lettie Gibson inspired me to become the person I am today."

She was driving, but I leaned over, put my head on her shoulder, and wrapped my arms around her. "I'm so glad I have you for my mom," I told her.

Mom actually offered to get me a couple of different outfits while we were shopping, but I acted like I only wanted a skirt, two t-shirts, and some new tennies. All of

them mega on sale, of course. I knew things were tight, and I wasn't about to make them tighter by being needy about clothes. It was better to have a lean wardrobe and my mom helping people with the work that she did than an overstuffed closet and lost girls having no one to turn to. Besides, if I ever got desperate for something designer, Blossom was always super cool about lending me stuff.

I didn't know how I felt about seeing Jessie again. My heart and my head were complete polar opposites. I refused to be one of those females who got caught up with an abusive guy and kept going back to him no matter how violent he was. But Jessie had been nothing but kind to me, saving me from a variety of creeps and never laying a hand on me. Still, he was a vampire. The undead didn't have the best reputation. My head hurt just thinking about it.

There was one question I needed answered, and it would dictate my actions forever after. I just had to wait for Jessie and force him to tell me. I needed to know the truth about what happened to Lillian Gibson.

Chapter 15

Jessie situated himself on the roof that night. "What's wrong?" he asked, as soon as he got a look at my face.

"Mom and I went to see Grandma Gibson this afternoon," I told him.

"How is Lillian?"

I gave an honest reply. "Not great. She's losing it a bit." I tapped my temple. "Half the time she thinks I'm her long lost sister and spends a lot of time warning me about the man I'm seeing and telling me his whole family is dangerous."

"I see," Jessie said, frowning. "You should probably listen to your grandmother. I'm sure she's right."

"How many questions do I have left?"

Jessie spread his hands, palms upward. "You tell me."

Rather than our usual debate, I decided to just forge ahead. Taking a deep breath, I launched into, "What was your relationship with Colette Gibson, and how did she die?"

Running his hand through his hair several times, Jessie looked down. "I can tell you about our relationship, but I can't tell you about how she died because I honestly don't know."

I said nothing, just waited.

"I was still a very new vampire when we came to America. Just a boy. We managed the blood supply, even back then, with a story about a hemophiliac brother who needed daily blood transfusions. No one really knew what the disease was back then, so it was pretty easy. We set up a small infirmary in a back room of the castle. Townsfolk could come to the back door to donate, and we'd give them a fairly generous payment. A lot of families were able to supplement their income that way."

"And nobody found it suspicious?"

“Not really. You have to remember, this was back in the thirties. There was no Internet or television or anything. And a lot of people were pretty darn poor. Most people were just happy to hand over a few pints of blood for some food money.”

“And that’s how you met Lettie? Selling her blood?”

“No, our housekeeper hired her and your grandmother as maids.”

“Didn’t anyone find it weird that you were asleep all day and only got up at night? That would have probably tipped me off.”

“The castle doesn’t have a lot of windows, and we claimed the whole family suffered from a sensitivity to light. Which, in a way, we do.” He shrugged with the small joke. “People are less likely to question eccentricities if they are getting paid well, and we made sure to pay slightly better than what was customary at the time.”

“So Lettie was hired as a maid at the castle and...” I coaxed him back on track.

“I noticed her beauty immediately, of course. She was so beautiful yet so very modest. She never took it seriously when people would praise her appearance. But that wasn’t what made me fall in love with her.”

“What was?” I hated myself for asking, but couldn’t stop.

He then said something I wasn’t expecting. “It was because she was kind. To everyone. It didn’t matter who. She was particularly worried about Arthur, our fictional sick brother. Staff weren’t allowed to enter his room, but she would always make up a bouquet of wildflowers and leave them in a vase outside his door for the nurse to take in to him. She said she wanted to bring him a bit of nature to keep his spirits up.”

“She was kind to you?” I wondered. It seemed incredible that such a handsome boy would fall for a girl because of her kind nature. That wasn’t something that happened too frequently in the modern world.

"Yes, very kind to me." He smiled at the memory. "I began to watch her. To find excuses to run into her. She was a great lover of books, and I arranged it so she could borrow as many as she liked from our private library."

Nice, and she liked to read, I thought. That didn't sound like anything that would draw the attention of a boy in my high school.

"One evening, I caught her looking in my direction the way I was always looking in hers. Our eyes met, and I felt like a flame had been kindled inside of me," he said, and I swear there were tears glistening in his eyes.

I reached out of the window and laid my hand on his sleeve while he collected himself. I desperately wanted to touch his cheek, his hair, anything really, but I knew that would make me shudder, and that seemed inappropriate given his emotional state.

Jessie continued with, "I began to court her but in secret. I knew my family wouldn't approve."

"Did she know that you..." I tried to figure the polite way to ask a delicate question. "Did she know about you?"

"She knew our family had a dark secret and we weren't like regular people, but I didn't want to just come out and tell her the full truth all at once because I knew it would frighten her too much."

"You wanted to make her your companion?"

"No," Jessie said in a defensive tone. "I wouldn't have done that to her. I didn't want her to have that kind of life."

"Then what were you thinking could happen between you? I mean, given that she was human and you're a vampire."

"It's rare, but under very special circumstances, vampires and humans can be together as equals. The Bishops have to approve it, and it usually means you'll be shunned by the vampire families."

"You guys have bishops?" I couldn't keep from interrupting him. "Like church bishops?"

"No, the Bishops are the oldest and most powerful vampire family in the world. They rule as kind of a governing body for us."

"Oh." I had more questions, but figured I'd better learn the fate of Aunt Colette first. "So, you loved Colette so much you were willing to be shunned?"

"I didn't care," he said with such passion that I definitely believed him. "Being part of the elite was nothing compared to being with Colette."

"You wanted to marry her?" I asked, feeling jealous of a girl who had more than likely died several decades before I was even born.

"When it's a vampire with a human, it's not considered marriage. We call it conjoined. And like I said, it's very rare. I would have had to vouch for her as my mate and then never take another, not even after her death."

"Not another human?"

"No. Not another mate, period. That's how much the Bishops want to discourage a non-vampire union."

"Wow," was all I could manage. It was such a big decision to make for someone who was really just a teenager. Colette would have gotten older and older, and Jessie would have stayed young and fresh. Eventually it would have looked like she was his grandmother. "You must have really loved her."

Jessie nodded.

"So, did you..." I felt awkward with the new terminology. "Did you conjoin?"

He shook his head and looked down at his hands, which he was clenching in his lap. "I told my family of my intentions, and they became very upset, forbidding me to soil the Vanderlind name with human blood."

I knew he didn't mean to insult me, but I couldn't keep myself from saying, "Yeah, gee, wouldn't want to soil the good name of a vampire."

Jessie was so caught up in the memory that he didn't pick up on my sarcasm. "Daniel kept insisting that I should just

turn her or make her my companion.”

“Why didn’t you turn her?” I asked.

“No,” Jessie whispered, the memory obviously causing him pain. “No, that wouldn’t have been right for her. She would have refused to eat. She would have starved herself.”

“Just like the Brontes,” I murmured.

“We decided we were going to run away together. We would elope and then face whatever we’d have to face as husband and wife. I knew if we were legally married in the human world that it would help our plea with the Bishops.”

I did very much want to know more about who the Bishops were and how much power they had but didn’t want to keep interrupting. Jessie’s eyes were wide and filled with grief as he relived the whole thing with the telling. “What happened?” I asked in a voice just above a whisper.

“I wanted to tell her my secret before we were wed. She insisted there was nothing I could say that would stop her from loving me, but I knew she didn’t realize the extent of evil that was in the world. We arranged to meet in the woods outside the castle that runs along the river. If she still loved me after I explained what I really was, then we would take a boat down to the next town and wake up the justice of the peace.”

“What happened?” I asked, feeling a chill run up my spine.

“I don’t know,” Jessie said in a voice that choked back a sob. “She never showed. I never saw her again.”

“Not to be cruel, but maybe she found out about the whole vampire thing and just ran away?” I suggested. It was a pretty damn scary thing to know.

“No. I wish that were true. When she didn’t show up, I searched for her. I found one of her shoes by a log in the woods, and that’s all. There was no blood; there was no trail; her family seemed to think she’d eloped. Or maybe they just wished she did. For years, I held out hope. Not that we could be together but that maybe she was still alive. Finally, I had

to accept that she was gone. My darling girl had vanished," he said in a ragged voice.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I survived," he sighed. "I kept going. I put one foot in front of the other day after day, year after year. Daniel insisted that I would get over it eventually, but he didn't realize how much I loved her."

"And it's been like that ever since?" I asked, my heart aching for him.

"No, not quite. Maybe fifteen or twenty years ago I woke up one night, and something was different. I felt a feeling that I hadn't had in a long time."

"What was it?"

"Hope," he said simply. "I wasn't happy, but I began to feel like I might want to live again. I started feeling better and better each day. I even agreed to celebrate my maker's day this year, which is something I've refused to do for decades. That's why it was such a large celebration."

I could hear my mom moving around downstairs, cleaning a few dishes that had been left in the sink. Crickets chirped, filling the night with their special music. "So you don't really know what happened to Lettie. It'll always be a mystery."

"I've had to come to accept that," he said with a sigh; then he lifted his arms in the air and stretched. "I should go. Your mother will be up soon to say goodnight." He got to his feet. "Oh," he said, remembering something that caused him to search his pockets. "I brought you something. I hope you don't mind."

My heart did a little somersault. "No, I don't mind," I managed. "As long as it's just a trinket."

Jessie chuckled. "It's definitely a trinket. I think you'll be pleased," he said, squatting down next to me, closer than he usually sat. I closed my eyes for a second to just enjoy the cloved-orange smell of him. "Open your eyes. Look," he said, pulling a chain from his pocket. At the end dangled a clear orb that seemed to capture the moonlight.

“What is it?” I asked, captivated by its simple beauty. The orb had a belt of silver around it to keep it in place. The metal had been worked into a design of flowers and vines.

“It’s carved from a rock crystal called Pools of Light. It’s the clearest of all the crystals and was very popular in jewelry when I was growing up. It made me think of you.”

“Why me?” I asked as I reached out to gently touch the smooth orb with one finger.

“Well, when I first saw you in the library, I thought you were Lettie. I could see only her when I was looking at you. But you’re not her. I know that now. You just look alike because you’re related.”

“Okay...?” That still didn’t explain anything about the crystal.

“Well,” he went on, “with Pools of Light, when you look through the crystal, it magnifies whatever you’re looking at and refracts it. That’s how you know it’s genuine.”

“I’m still not following you,” I said, our hands almost uniting over the bauble.

“It’s just a way for me to separate you from Lettie in my head. You’re not her, but it took a while for my brain to adjust. It’s like looking at a refracted image.”

I was too embarrassed to admit that I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by a refracted image. Science was not my strongest subject. My confusion must have shown on my face because he said, “Here, let me show you.” Lifting the pendant to his eye, he said, “Look through the crystal. We can still see each other, but differently.”

I leaned so close to him that our breath mingled together; we were just a kiss apart. Steadying myself to peek into the crystal, I stifled a shriek.

“Are you okay?” he asked, lowering the bauble.

“Yes,” I managed to whisper.

“You don’t like it,” he said, his handsome face showing keen disappointment.

"No, I love it," I told him. "It's the loveliest thing anyone has ever given me."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I assured him. I was trembling all over, and he knew I was lying. I tried to cover with, "Sometimes I find it hard to be so close to you."

"Because I'm a vampire," he said bitterly, looking away.

"No," I assured him, touching him on the sleeve. "You know that's not true. It's just..."

"Aurora? You still up?" my mom tapped at my door.

"Goodnight," Jessie whispered, pressing the orb into my palm and then disappearing into the night.

I can't even remember what I said to my mother. I guess I managed to string a few coherent sentences together because she wished me goodnight and went to her own room. As soon as she left, I scrambled for my dream journal. My last entry was about the inverted eye. I had been just inches away from someone I loved, but viewing him in a way that was distorted. Upside down somehow and backwards. When I peeked through the Pools of Light, looking into Jessie's beautiful gray eye, that's how it appeared.

It didn't make sense. Not any of it. My stomach clenched with the realization that I had somehow dreamed about Jessie's gift before he'd even given it to me. I slumped on my bed clutching my head in my hands. My brain had gone haywire. What was wrong with me?

Chapter 16

It was getting late, but I knew I would never be able to fall asleep. I started flipping through the journal, looking with fresh eyes at the dreams I'd written down. Originally, I had been trying to make sense of them as they'd related to Jessie, not as they related to Aunt Lettie. I thought the dream about the beautiful library was because Jessie was so beautiful and I'd first seen him in a library, and it all kind of blended with my love of books. The splashes of color that became the wildflowers dream just seemed like a magical setting to be with a magical being, but maybe it was something to do with gathering flowers for the sick brother that didn't exist.

My head started to throb the more I thought about it. Was I somehow Colette Gibson reincarnated?

No, that didn't make any sense to me at all. She was always that mystery from Grandma Gibson's past, but I didn't feel connected to her. Not like how I felt connected to Jessie. And the Pools of Light pendant wasn't hers, so that didn't explain the whole thing with my dreaming about Jessie's eye.

I desperately wanted to talk to Jessie but also knew I should probably never speak to him again. He was one of the most dangerous creatures on the planet, but I also felt the safest when I was close to him. Were the dreams I was having actually mine or just the fragmented memories of a dead girl? And what about the dream where a creature was chasing me in the dark and I fell near a large log?

I lay awake for most the night again, playing with the Pools of Light. I wished I could use it like a crystal ball and see into the past. If the dreams I was having were in some way Colette Gibson's memories, then something very evil

had killed her. Something that lusted for blood. Something animal as well as man. Something with hateful gray eyes.

"Hey," Blossom said when she opened her front door. "I was beginning to think you were blowing me off."

I had almost blown her off. Not intentionally, but I had completely spaced that we'd planned a bake-a-thon. "No, I couldn't fall asleep last night and just couldn't get it in gear this morning," I said. I didn't tell her that I also had to scramble to find some interesting cookie recipes to print out once I'd realized we had plans.

"Yeah, you didn't email me any ingredients, so my mom just got the basic stuff."

"Oh." Another thing that hadn't even entered my brain. "Sorry."

She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing me. "What's up with you lately?"

"I don't know," I sighed. "Just been a little off."

"I know," she said as we headed for the kitchen. "It's like you don't even want to have fun anymore."

"I wouldn't say that." I was letting her be a little critical of me because I had been pretty absent for the last few weeks, but I didn't want her to go too overboard. "I just don't find Jimmy Stevens and his football buddies all that interesting to be around."

"Yeah, me neither," Blossom agreed as she tossed me a frilly apron that she'd pulled off a hook from the pantry. Part of the fun of a bake-a-thon was that we wore traditional aprons like the housewives from the nineteen fifties. "He's not even that good of a kisser," she confided. "And he's been getting kind of handsy lately."

Blossom and I both weren't down with how grabby guys could get once they thought you were their girlfriend. So many of them acted so entitled. "Did you talk to him about it?"

"Damn straight, I did. I told him, 'Your erection is not my problem,' but I don't think he was really listening."

"Why not?"

She rolled her eyes. "He was too busy trying to shove my hand down his pants."

"Yeah, um... Blossom..."

She put up a hand to stop me. "Don't even get started, Mrs. Keys. I already told him if he doesn't cut the crap then he's history."

"Okay, that's good." Whenever she had the chance, my mother took the liberty of training my friends not to accept any nonsense from boys either. I tied my apron around my waist. It was white with green checks and plenty of ruffles. "What should we make first?"

And then things were fun. We were just two girls goofing around in the kitchen baking cookies and eating cookie dough. There was no talk of boys or vampires or any of that junk. It felt great just to be with my best friend having a good time and not worrying about all the other stuff. By four o'clock, we were lying on the floor in the family room too stuffed with cookies to move.

The phone rang. Blossom only shifted her eyes slightly in its direction. "Are you going to get that?" I asked.

"Nah." She closed her eyes drowsily. "It's probably only Jimmy wanting to rub up against my leg. So not romantic."

And there was the difference between high school boys and girls.

The afternoon was so enjoyable, I felt a very strong urge to share with Blossom everything I'd learned since the party at the castle. She was my best friend, after all. Plus, it was hell not having anyone to confide in about the vampires and my crazy dreams. I actually took a deep breath in order to tell her, but then the words caught in my throat. Jessie would never forgive me if I blabbed. Plus, what if she believed me? And then other people believed her? At the very least, Jessie and his family would have to leave Tiburon,

and then I would never see him again. That would just be too horrible to imagine. So I kept my lips zipped.

There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to see Jessie that evening. So when he didn't show up, I was really blindsided. Was he mad at me? Had something happened to him? Did he not know how to use a phone? It was so frustrating. I just sat there by the window for two hours feeling like a complete jerk. Even after I decided to give up and closed the window, I didn't actually give up. Not really. My brain knew he wasn't going to come, but my heart kept jumping every time there was a small noise outside. I was frustrated enough to scream into my pillow.

I was in a complete daze at school the next day. Never mind distracting myself with extra class work, I couldn't focus on anything. I kept playing our Saturday night conversation over and over again in my head. Had I done something to offend him? Did he decide that being with me was too much of a temptation? Or did he just realize that I was only a sad, faded carbon copy of his Colette?

More than one teacher remarked that I seemed "a little distracted." It was amazing how quickly they'd become accustomed to my paying attention. Or, at least, appearing to pay attention. Outwardly, I guess I looked frazzled, but on the inside, I was tearing myself apart with the thought that I would never see Jessie again. The worst part of it was there was that little, practical part of my brain, the part that probably has all the survival instincts, that kept telling me that it was for the best.

"Want to go to the mall or something?" Blossom asked as she stood by my locker while I sorted my books.

The school day was finally over, and I had been wondering how I was going to distract myself for the evening. "Is Jimmy coming?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not if I can help it." Her reply gave the strong impression that Jimmy's days as her boyfriend

were numbered.

"Okay," I said. "Sounds good."

As we headed out to the parking lot, something caught my eye. Or more accurately, someone. A very tall figure in a dark suit stood waiting beside my car, his shadow stretching across half the parking lot. I froze in my tracks, my heart hammering at my ribs.

"Who the hell is that?" Blossom said out of the corner of her mouth.

"Viggo," I replied. Then, looking at her, I asked, "Can you give me a minute?"

"I guess." Blossom shrugged. "If you're sure he won't eat your car."

I walked up to the mountain of a man, my legs trembling a little beneath me. I wasn't afraid of Viggo, but I knew Jessie had probably sent him, and I was wondering if I was about to receive that vampire version of the kiss-off.

"Hi, Viggo," I said in a low voice. I could feel half the school staring at us as kids filtered out to their cars.

"Hello, Aurora. You are looking vell," he said, making a small bow, his hands clasped behind his back.

"So are you," I said, dipping my head in return. "I'm happy to see you." Lowering my voice even more, I added, "I wanted to thank you again for your help the other week."

"Mr. Wanderlind asked me to deliver this letter to you," he said, reaching into his breast pocket and pulling out an envelope. His hands were so enormous they made the letter look the size of a business card.

"Okay, great," I said, taking the envelope with shaking hands. "Thank you."

"Things are bad, now," the giant said. "You must leave Mr. Wanderlind alone." He leaned toward me a little and added, "Especially at night."

"Why?" I gulped. "What's going on? Did Jessie tell you that?"

Viggo ignored my questions. He simply turned and strode away. Two cars pulling out at the same time almost collided as both drivers stared after the giant.

Blossom walked up to stand beside me. "Holy... whatever the hell that was."

"Don't be mean," I told her. "He's nice."

"And just how, exactly, do you know him?"

I silently cursed. What the hell was Jessie thinking sending a giant to my school? Had he heard of that groundbreaking invention, the telephone? Was he aware of the post office? At the very least, he could have easily just slipped the note through the mail slot in our front door.

"Aurora?" Blossom pressed.

"Don't you remember Viggo?" I acted surprised.

"No, I think I'd remember a guy like that."

"Wow, you were more out of it than I thought," I said, giving her an incredulous look. "We met him at the castle. You talked to him for, like, ten minutes."

Blossom narrowed her eyes at me. "What did I talk to him about?"

"Mostly how tall he was," I improvised. "You were a little fixated with it. I think you kind of made him a little uncomfortable." I was hoping to embarrass her into not asking too many questions.

"Oh, yeah." Blossom nodded several times. "I think I kind of remember him. I mean, he's pretty unforgettable. What did he want, anyway?"

"I... uh..." I guess she hadn't seen Viggo hand me the letter. I discretely slipped it into my bag. "I still have Jessie Vanderlind's coat, and he asked me to return it when I had a moment."

"Back to the castle?" Blossom's eyes grew round. "Take me with you when you drop it off, okay?"

"Yeah, well... I told him it's at the dry cleaners." I unlocked the car. "Let's get going if we're hitting the mall."

Jessie's letter was burning a hole in my backpack. I could feel it there, unopened, unread, and it was killing me. There was no way I could read it with Blossom around. She was not the kind of girl who responded well to comments like, "It's private," or "It's none of your business." I had to bide my time until I had a moment alone.

My opportunity came when we were in Halle Brother's department store. I made the excuse of needing to find a sports bra. Blossom did ask "Why?" but didn't insist on coming into the dressing room with me. Trying on a bra is something a girl needs to do alone.

I made up some excuse about, "Think I might start jogging," and grabbed a couple of random bras off a rack, hurrying to the dressing rooms.

Once I was safely locked away from prying eyes, I pulled out Jessie's letter. The envelope was obviously made of some very nice paper. I didn't want to just tear it open, so I rooted around in my bag until I found a hair clip, which I used as a letter opener to slit the paper.

My Dear Aurora,

Urgent business calls me away and I will be unable to meet with you in the foreseeable future. I regret that I am unable to tell you this in person. Please take care of yourself.

Best Wishes,

Jessie

Best wishes...? Seriously?

Chapter 17

I really didn't know what I expected Jessie's note to say, but that definitely wasn't it. Was he actually busy, or had I just received a vampire-style Dear John letter?

"What's wrong with you?" Blossom asked as we sat in the food court, splitting one of Aunt Agatha's giant pretzels. "You look like your dog died." It was a weird comment because Blossom knew I didn't care for most dogs, but still, she was concerned.

"I guess I'm not feeling great," I mumbled, not trusting my voice not to crack if I spoke at a normal level.

"Oh." Blossom immediately dropped the piece of pretzel she was about to put in her mouth and wiped her hands rather vigorously on a napkin. "Thanks for sharing."

"I don't think it's catching," I told her. "Probably just my week of the woman."

"Oh," Blossom repeated, picking her bite of pretzel back up and popping it in her mouth.

I don't know how I made it through shopping without looking at Jessie's note again. I wanted to stare at it until the words were etched into my eyeballs. I needed to divine its meaning. I went to reach for it in my bag so many times Blossom must have thought I was developing a nervous twitch.

"Sorry the mall wasn't that fun today," I said as I pulled the bug into Blossom's driveway. "I'm just super low energy."

"Don't worry about it. I completely understand." After she got out of the car, she leaned down to add, "Take an iron pill and eat some chocolate."

Even though I knew he wasn't coming, I still sat by my window at nine o'clock waiting for Jessie. It was like I couldn't help myself. I felt pathetic on a couple of different

levels. I'd been wound up about guys before, but never so very tightly wound. It was painful, and I couldn't explain my feelings, not even to myself.

I was just sitting there, fiddling with the Pools of Light pendant, noticing how the crystal captured the moonlight, when something in our backyard drew my attention. Someone was back there. A very tall someone. I knew in a second it was Viggo. "What the hell?" I said to myself and hurried out of the room.

"Viggo." I walked straight up to the giant. "What are you doing here?"

"I am waiting," he told me. "You should go back into the house."

"What are you waiting for?" I demanded. I felt like a bit of a fool confronting the massive man with just a parka pulled over my pajamas, but I didn't let that stop me.

He shrugged his enormous shoulders. "Mr. Wanderlind told me to wait, so I wait. He told me to watch you, so I watch."

"He what?" I tried to process what I'd just heard. Jessie had set up a guard to keep an eye on me? That sounded a bit paranoid. "Listen, Viggo, Jessie Vanderlind does not make the rules around here. This is my house and my lawn. I don't need watching."

"This is not your house," the giant said. "This is the house of your mother. I will ask her if she does not permit me to stand here." He made to step around me.

"Whoa, wait a minute." I waved both hands in the air, trying to get him to stop. "I really don't think bringing my mom in on this is a good idea." The less she knew about vampires, giants, and sneaking into castles, the better.

Viggo re-assumed his parade-rest posture. He apparently didn't feel the need to gloat at outsmarting me.

I glared at him. "Do you always do exactly what the Vanderlinds tell you to do?"

He glanced down at me. "The Wanderlinds, no. Mr. Jessie Wanderlind, yes."

"And why is that?" I asked.

Viggo ignored me.

We stood there for a while, me staring at him, him staring at nothing. I toyed with the idea of trying to scale him like Everest and wondered how much of a fuss that would cause. Probably enough to draw the attention of my mother and quite a few neighbors. I thought better of it and just went back inside.

I had to accept the fact that I might not ever see Jessie again. The thought made my body ache all over. I was so angry, frustrated, and hurt that I cried in my room for about an hour and then sniffed for the next two. I didn't want to sleep because I didn't want to dream. The better part of the night I spent staring at the pendant he had given me. It was probably a farewell gift, and I was pitifully grateful to have it. At least it was something to remember him by.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday all melted into one big pile of misery. How could I be heartbroken over a guy I hadn't even kissed? And one who could just as easily save my life as suck all the blood out of my body.

Viggo was at his post on Tuesday night. I tried to ignore him. On Wednesday my mother was out, so I went outside and marched right up to him. "You can leave now," I said. "I understand that Jessie doesn't want to see me. I won't try to contact him. You don't have to watch me anymore."

The giant glanced briefly in my direction. "You are a stupid girl," he told me. "Go back in the house."

I did go back in the house and straight over to the telephone. I dialed 911 and waited to be connected to emergency services. "Hello? There's this giant creepy guy in my backyard, and he won't go away," I said, allowing my voice to sound as tearful as I felt.

The cops came by a few minutes later. Tiburon did have an excellent police department, compliments of the

Vanderlinds. I pointed out Viggo to the two officers that came to the door. "He won't be bothering you anymore, Ma'am," I was told, once they had convinced the giant to be on his way.

Thursday night, Viggo was nowhere to be seen. That was probably a good thing. My mother would have noticed the giant in the backyard eventually, but his absence tore open my emotional wound again. I was the one that had called the cops on him, but I knew that his absence meant Jessie had told him not to bother about me anymore. Was that a good thing? I wasn't sure. But having Viggo gone meant Jessie was fading from my life.

Friday morning, I woke up disgusted with myself. Poor baby no longer got to flirt with a vampire. It was a suicidal thing to do in the first place. I hated sitting by the phone waiting for some guy to call who was never going to call. And this was a million times worse. Prying myself out of bed, I found an empty box in the offseason closet. In it I put Jessie's tux jacket, handkerchief, pocket watch, and pendant. I wasn't going to sit around moping for the rest of my life. I had to purge myself of the vampire's mementos and hope that it helped.

As I stood over the box with a roll of packing tape in one hand, I had a moment of weakness and snatched the Pools of Light pendant out of the pile. I would, after all, need something to get me through the nights. I intended to be strong, but I wasn't that strong.

I was standing outside the post office when they unlocked the doors to the public. It meant being late for school, but I knew if I waited until the end of the day, or even lunch, I would have lost my resolve.

"You a fan of the castle?" the postal clerk asked as I handed over the package.

I had been totally in my own head and wasn't quite sure I heard him correctly. "Sorry?"

"I see here you're sending something to the Vanderlind Castle, and I was wondering if you were a fan."

He looked like he was just asking a question to be friendly. I didn't see any hidden agenda behind it. "The Vanderlind Castle has fans?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Oh, yeah." He nodded with conviction. "It all goes through here, so we see plenty of it. Stuff from all over. Cards mostly. Sometimes packages. Girls will send their photos," he said with a confidential wink. "A lot of them are pretty good."

I wasn't going to ask him how he happened to see the photos that I assumed were in sealed envelopes. "Why would people send mail to the castle?" I wondered aloud.

"You tell me," he said, poking at the box I'd placed in front of him.

"That's not a present," I assured the clerk.

"Sure it's not." He gave me a smug look.

I rolled my eyes.

As soon as I got to my car, I regretted sending the package. I'd anticipated I would, but it was for the best. There was nothing left for me to do but ride out my emotions. Some guys you get over in a few days; some take a couple of weeks, or even a few months; but with Jessie, it felt different. I looked at my potential period of feeling like garbage in terms of years. I wondered if I would feel better before I graduated from high school.

Speaking of high school, I was late. Very late. Mrs. Stokes in homeroom made some mention of an after school detention, but I guess I looked at her with such misery that she mumbled, "Well, let's just finish taking attendance."

During lunch, Blossom said to me, "Aurora, it can't be your time of the woman all the time. Nobody's that fertile. What the hell is wrong with you?"

I could have made something up about my dad, I guess, but I just wasn't thinking fast enough. "I don't know," was all I could manage.

“Well, you just need to get over it,” she informed me. “I mean, after the bake-a-thon, I thought everything was cool again, but I guess I was wrong. I’m sorry I was an idiot at the castle, okay? And I really appreciate you looking out for me, but you need to just get over it already.”

I gave her a flat look. “Do you really think everything in my life revolves around you?” I snarled. “I haven’t been thinking about what a dumbass you were at the castle at all. Okay? I just happen to be dealing with my own shit that has nothing to do with you.” I got up from the lunch table where we were both sitting and stormed out of the room.

I was fuming. Did Blossom really think everything I did and thought was all about her? How self-absorbed can she get?

I felt hot, angry tears welling in my eyes as I hurried for the closest bathroom. Mr. Cooper, the math teacher, saw me in the hall and tried to stop me with, “Can I see your pass?” but by then I was in full flood, and he just let me rush by him. I assumed he didn’t feel like dealing with me being emotional.

I managed to pull myself together by the time my lunch period was over so I could stumble to my next class. By the end of the day, I was exhausted from simply containing my feelings. Obviously, I was losing my mind. No one is sane who believes in vampires and suspects herself of being reincarnated. I decided the best thing I could do was go home, eat ice cream, and watch the most mindless thing I could find on TV.

“Hey,” Blossom said, edging up to me as I stood at my locker. “I feel like a jerk if I’ve been being selfish or anything.”

“That’s okay,” I told her. “I’m sorry if you thought I was angry at you.”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Good. ‘Cause, you know, you’re my best friend, and I don’t like it when you’re pissed at me.”

“I’m not,” I assured her. “Can we just drop it?” I closed my locker.

“Okay.” She paused. “But if you ever want to talk about anything, you know I’m always here for you, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, thanks.”

We started heading out of the school together. “There’s a party at the Tib tomorrow night. Want to go?”

The Tib was a little spit of land on the shore of the Tiburon River that was shielded from the nearest road by a small patch of woods. Kids parked their cars in the strip mall across the street then snuck through the trees to the spit to hang out. Sometimes there was a keg. We all liked to believe the cops didn’t know about it, but they probably did.

I guess Blossom could tell by the expression on my face that I was about to say no because she added, “Come on. If you’re not mad at me then you really have to stop being such a drip.”

“Are you going with Jimmy?” I asked.

She thought about it. “Why don’t I go there with you, but he’ll give me a ride home?”

That actually worked really well for me because it meant I could leave when I wanted and wouldn’t have to wait for her. “Okay,” I agreed. “I thought you were going to get rid of Mr. Stevens.”

“I probably will,” she shrugged. “Maybe in a couple of weeks.”

That was Blossom speak for, *I’m looking around to see if there’s anyone else I want to date.*

Chapter 18

The Tib was the Tib. There was nothing super interesting about it beyond that it was on the river. I picked up Blossom the next evening, as agreed, but she and Jimmy appeared to be in some kind of fight. She didn't come right out and tell me this, but when we arrived and I pointed him out in a cluster of boys, Blossom said, "He thinks he's so much cooler than he actually is."

"Hey, Aurora," I heard a male voice say quite close to me.

I turned around to see Fred Lighton standing next to me. He was a jock, but he didn't usually use that as an excuse for a personality. "Hey, Fred." Blossom faded into the distance, under the assumption that it was a good opportunity for me to flirt. Previous to meeting Jessie, I probably would have been a bit more excited that Fred had come up to me, but post Jessie, I was just being social.

"You're looking good this evening," he said, taking in my outfit.

"Uh... Thanks," I glanced down, surprised by the compliment. I hadn't put much thought into what I was wearing, just grabbed some jeans and an old sweater. "It's been getting colder lately." I knew it was never brilliant to talk about the weather, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I guess it's going to be the gloaming soon," he observed, squinting up at the forming moon.

"Oh, yeah." I had forgotten about the gloaming. There was a strange weather anomaly in Tiburon that locals called the gloaming. Probably because it usually started around dusk. But in early fall, right around the full moon, there was a way that the wind whistled through the trees that made it sound like a person wailing. Or more like a movie ghost from some black and white horror flick wailing. It usually only

happened for one or two nights, but it used to spook the crap out of me as a kid. As I got older, I would just do what everybody else in town did and block it out with music or by turning up the television. Meteorologists and paranormal investigators liked to show up every couple of years to try to figure it out, but no one had come up with a satisfactory explanation beyond the wind.

“Want to do a whippet?” Fred smiled. “We’ve got a ton of them. Tom’s brother set us up.”

I had tried whippets once, like an idiot. Mostly out of curiosity and a bit of peer pressure. After I’d inhaled, the world started spinning really fast and I felt like I could read the minds of everyone in the room, and I did not like what most of them were thinking. “No thanks,” I told him. “They make me throw up.”

“Yeah, I don’t like them either,” he told me in a confidential voice.

“Then why do you do them?”

“I don’t,” he said with a shrug. “I just act like I do and none of my friends seem to notice.”

“Then why offer me one?” I wanted to know.

Fred gave another easygoing shrug. “Seemed like the cordial thing to do. Want a beer?” He held up a six pack on one of those plastic rings. Two cans were already missing.

I’m not a big drinker, even when I’m in a super-great mood, but standing around with a can in my hand would make me blend in a little better as someone having a good time. I had considered picking an empty can up off the ground and just pretending I was drinking from it, but this was even better. “Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

Fred jerked a can free and handed it to me. I used the corner of my sweater to clean the rim then cracked it open. “Cheers,” he said, lifting his can.

We toasted, and then I took a sip, the bubbles burning the back of my throat. I noticed that Blossom had drifted over to talk to Jimmy. It was probably in my best interest to

try to make my conversation with Fred last, or it was going to be a long evening of standing by myself. I searched my brain for something to say that didn't involve vampires, the castle, crazy aunts, or Jessie. Those were the topics that cluttered my mind, but they were not exactly things that compelled a jock to keep talking to you. "Um... What sport do you play again?" I asked, figuring it was a safe bet.

He kind of laughed a little like he was surprised I didn't know already. "Football. I play football," he told me.

"Oh..." I tried to think of a follow-up question that would make sense. Finally, I just gave up and said, "I'd ask you what position you play, but besides the quarterback, I really don't know of any."

"You don't know about football?" Fred sounded genuinely astounded, like it was a requirement to get into high school.

"No," I replied. I wanted to point out that I was a girl and that lots of girls didn't really care about most sports, but that would have probably come off as sounding harsh, so I just said, "Not really."

Fred took that as an invitation to enlighten me. "Okay," he began, "first off, football is the greatest game on earth."

The nice thing about having a sports enthusiast explain a sport to you is that you don't really have to pay attention. You can just make eye contact and nod periodically. Fred was so absorbed with explaining the game that I don't think he noticed that I wasn't paying the least bit of attention. I just sipped my beer and every once in a while glanced in Blossom's direction. She and Jimmy were having an intense conversation, but it didn't appear to be a fight or anything.

"You got that so far?" Fred asked, interrupting my reverie.

"I think so," I said, going for another swig of beer, then being surprised to find that the can was empty.

"Here." Fred cracked open another can and handed it to me before he continued with his lecture. I hoped he wasn't going to try to quiz me later because I would have failed.

To be honest, it wasn't the worst way to spend an evening. Fred was very animated, and even though I didn't care at all about the sport, it was kind of fun watching him talk. He was tall and good looking. Not as good looking as Jessie, of course, but I wasn't going to think about the vampire if I could help it. I took another large swig of beer. I was a lightweight when it came to alcohol, so I was already feeling a little buzzed. It took the edge off my pain, if only temporarily.

Every once in a while, one of Fred's friends would bust in on our conversation to high five him or whatever else guys do when they want to give a buddy a hard time but not distract him too much from his quarry. "We should get out of here," Fred said, after the third or fourth guy had hassled him a little. "Want to go for a walk?"

I guess I had been gazing too intently at the football player and he mistook it for non-sports related interest. I knew "a walk" was code for making out in the woods. I wondered if that was something I wanted to do. I mean, I wasn't exactly crushing on Fred, but he was attractive and maybe mashing my lips against his would help me forget the vampire at least for a few minutes. "Okay," I agreed. "Let me just find Blossom first."

"She's fine," he said, grabbing my hand. "She's probably with Jimmy somewhere."

I didn't doubt that he was right, but I still wanted to tell her what I was doing. Fred seemed like a good guy, but it was not super smart to wander off into the woods without someone who cared about your safety knowing where you went.

After a moment of hunting through the groups of teenagers, I spotted Jimmy with a couple of his friends. "Hey, Jimmy." I walked up to him, Fred still clutching my hand. His was warm and sweaty and didn't send shivers down my spine, but maybe that was a good thing. "You seen Blossom around?"

"That chick is so not worth the hassle," he said, mostly for his friends' benefit. I assumed he was annoyed with her because he hadn't made any headway with Blossom as far as her no-hanky-panky-until-I-know-you-better rule.

"Okay." I didn't argue with him. "But do you know where she is?"

He shrugged, playing it cool. "Not my problem."

I felt annoyance kindle in my belly. They must have broken up because he had to know I was going to tell Blossom that he was acting like a tool. "Where was she when you last saw her?" I pressed, trying to keep my temper under control when what I really wanted to do was give him a good smack on the back of the head.

He waved a hand vaguely in the air to our surroundings. "Here."

"Come on." Fred tugged at my hand impatiently. "I'm sure she's fine."

But I wasn't so sure. Jimmy's cavalier attitude left me believing that maybe Blossom was upset. "No." I freed my hand from Fred's grasp. "I need to find her first."

"Okay, fine," he said. He turned to Jimmy. "Hey, man. Where's Blossom?" They were both on the football team; he probably figured he had more pull.

"She took off. She could be anywhere," was the blithe reply.

Fred looked at me. He could tell that his hopes of a little fun in the woods were over, but instead of being all huffy about it like a lot of guys would be, he said, "Do you want me to help you find her?"

"Would you?" I instantly liked Fred about a hundred times more than I had a minute earlier.

"Hey, Aurora." A girl named Liz walked up to me. We were in the same English class. "Some guy gave me this to give to you." She handed me an envelope.

"Who?" I asked, eagerly taking it, instantly thinking of Jessie.

"I don't know. Just some guy," she said. "Super hot, though."

"A young guy?" I asked, tearing at the paper. "Like, our age?"

"No." She shook her head then cocked it to one side, swaying a little. I could tell she was kind of drunk, but she didn't think she was. "Maybe in his thirties. Blond hair, kind of a sexy accent."

"Viktor?" I choked, seriously mangling the envelope in my need to open it quickly.

Aurora,

Meet me under the public pier. Come alone or she's as good as dead.

Viktor

"Oh, my God." I started to tremble.

"What is it?" Fred squeezed my elbow to help steady me.

"It's Blossom," I told him. "She's..." but I never got to complete my sentence because just then a couple guys came charging through the Tib.

"Cops!" the first one yelled.

"It's a bust!" his buddy shouted as they hotfooted it out of there.

Everyone stood completely still for half a second, processing the new information. Then the dam broke, and teenagers started running in every direction. Some ran into the woods toward the road, but that was more than likely the direction the police would use to reach the Tib. Other's charged toward the river, probably hoping to skirt along the shore.

"Come on!" Fred grabbed my hand and started running.

"No." I fought him to free my arm. "I have to find Blossom. She's at the pier."

"She'll meet you at your car," he insisted.

"No, you don't understand..." I tried to explain.

"Aurora, if I get busted, I'm benched. I'll lose my scholarship," Fred told me, his eyes pleading, desperate to flee but not ready to just abandon me.

"Go," I told him. I had a plan, and it didn't really matter if Fred was with me or not. What I really needed to do was find the cops.

Chapter 19

Screw going to the pier alone to meet some vampire who had kidnapped my best friend. I wasn't an idiot. The best I could have done with that scenario was trade my life for Blossom's. Not that I wouldn't do it if that was the only option, but I preferred it if we both lived.

"Where are the cops?" I asked two girls as they scurried past.

"They're over there somewhere, I think." One waved in a general direction that ran parallel to the road rather than toward it. That didn't make sense to me, but I started running where she had indicated anyway.

It wasn't easy to plunge through the woods in the dark. The moon wasn't quite full, but at least it provided some light. Branches tore at my hair and scratched my face. I was grateful that I had decided to wear my new tennies rather than something more stylish. At least I had some traction.

There were three boys crouching by a large tree, and I ran up to them. "Where are the cops?" I yelled. "Has anyone seen them?"

"Shut up," one of them snapped at me. "They'll hear you."

"No, I won't shut up. I want them to hear me. Just tell me where they are. Have any of you seen them?"

"I saw a couple of them over there." A second guy jabbed his thumb in the same direction that the girls had indicated. "They're huge. I don't think they're regular cops. I think there's a whole SWAT team."

Why would Tiburon bring in a SWAT team to bust up a keg party? I wondered, but I didn't pause long enough to ask. Plunging forward into the trees, I started yelling, "Over here! I need the police right now! Over here!"

The boys must have thought I was crazy. They turned tail and ran in the opposite direction.

After crashing through the woods for several hundred yards, yelling my head off, my lungs were burning, and I had a stitch in my side. I had to stop and lean against a tree to catch my breath. If there were cops, they were nowhere close to where I was standing. Either I had been pointed in the wrong direction or...

"Oh, no!" I croaked. There were no cops. It had been just a false warning to clear out the woods of anyone I might have been able to convince to help me. Viktor's plan was diabolical. He really meant it when he said I had to go to the pier alone.

"No way in hell," I growled to myself, reaching for my cell phone but only finding an empty pocket. "What the...?" Where had my phone gone? I knew I had it with me when I left the house. Then I remembered an older boy bumping into me when Blossom and I were still in the parking lot heading toward the Tib. I thought it was kind of weird at the time because it was a big parking lot and you'd think there was plenty of space allowing people not to collide into each other. Suddenly, it made sense. Viktor had done quite a bit of planning.

I tried to think of what to do. I could go home. Just give in to my fear and abandon Blossom to her fate. That would have been an incredibly crappy friend thing to do. And I would probably never have gotten a good night's sleep again. I was pretty sure Blossom was the kind of girl who would haunt me. Plus, killing my friend wouldn't satisfy Viktor. He wasn't that type of guy. He'd just keep coming for me. I had to face him at some point.

But I wasn't going empty handed. I searched around the floor of the woods until I found a fallen tree branch. I snapped off several stake-length pieces, tucking some in the waistband of my jeans and the rest in my back pockets. I pulled my sweater down over the stakes in front to help

keep them from falling out but left the ones sticking out in back for easy access.

As I retraced my steps through the woods toward the pier, I felt bad for my mom. In all likelihood, she would never know what happened to me. I laughed bitterly at the realization that I really was like Aunt Lettie.

I made my way to the banks of the Tiburon as I got closer to the pier. A couple was walking briskly toward me, the guy throwing a concerned glances over his shoulder. The girl looked at me, and her eyes widened. "I wouldn't go that way if I were you. There's a really creepy guy below the pier."

"I know," I told them in a low voice. I wasn't sure how good of hearing vampires had. "He's got my friend down there. I need you to call the police and tell them there's been a kidnapping."

"Yeah, right." The guy rolled his eyes.

"I'm serious," I said in a harsh whisper. "That guy has my friend, and I need you to call the police."

"Come on, Sherri." He grabbed his girlfriend's arm and started pulling her away.

"Maybe we should call," she said, looking back at me, a worried expression on her face.

I clasped my hands together in a pleading gesture and mouthed the word, "Please."

"It's just a prank," he insisted. "We'll get in trouble for making a false report."

A dark figure was leaning against one of the pilings of the pier as I approached. I could tell right away by his cavalier attitude that it was Viktor, even before I saw his fangs gleaming in the moonlight as he chuckled with delight upon seeing me.

"Where's Blossom?" I demanded, ignoring his glee.

"Oh, she's fine," he insisted. "In fact, she's completely oblivious that she's in any danger." He laughed. "As usual."

"Where is she?" I repeated.

The vampire grinned even more, the sight of his dagger-like teeth sending shivers down my spine. "Someplace safe," he assured me.

I waited for him to do something. Anything, really. He was the one that had summoned me, so I assumed he had something in mind.

He just stood there, looking me over with an amused sneer on his face. I had thought he was handsome when we first met him at the castle, but his personality ruined his looks. He was sinister, creepy, and, more than likely, deadly.

Finally, I gave up waiting and said, "You wanted me here and I'm here."

"Yes, I love it when dinner brings itself to me. It must be like when you humans get a pizza delivered," he mused.

Did he really think he was being witty?

I thought about the stakes in my back pocket. Why hadn't I asked Jessie anything about how to kill a vampire? Probably because it would have been rude to ask, *If I stabbed you with a piece of wood, would it really kill you?* And also because I was too busy thinking about how much I wanted to be with him. But I did learn a few things about being a vampire, and maybe that would help.

"What do you want, Viktor?" I asked. "You can't touch me, you know."

"And why not?" Viktor seemed intrigued.

"Because I belong to Jessie Vanderlind," I informed him. "I am his companion."

The vampire tilted back his head and laughed. His mirth lasted several seconds. A small voice in my head urged me to stake the creature while he was distracted. That would have been the smart thing to do. But it's not easy to strike someone down in cold blood, even a member of the undead, so I hesitated, and the moment past.

"Thank you for that," the vampire said, wiping his eyes. "If I hadn't already decided to kill you, I might decide to keep you as a companion myself."

"I am his companion," I insisted. "I love him, and I would do anything for him. I give him my blood, and he doesn't like to share."

"My dear girl." Viktor shook his head. "Jessie Vanderlind is precisely the reason why I'm going to drain you."

"What?" I somehow thought he was still mad about me not opening the cell door in the dungeon or something. "Why?"

"Because he bloodied me, and he threw me out of his home," the vampire said, his voice petulant. "I won't kill him, but your death should teach him a lesson in manners."

Crap. I was really screwed. "You don't have to bother. Jessie doesn't care a thing about me."

It was obvious the vampire didn't believe me. "You just said you were his companion. You said that you loved him. Please don't tell me you were lying."

"No, I wasn't lying," I said in a small voice. "I do love him, and I would be his companion only..." I felt the hot tears welling in my eyes.

"Only what?" he asked, his eyes glowing. He was practically feeding off my pain.

"Only he doesn't love me," I managed to blurt, angrily wiping away a few tears that had escaped onto my cheeks.

Viktor sighed, letting his shoulders droop a little. "So sad." He clucked his tongue. "My poor girl. I guess I'll have to find some other way to revenge myself on Vanderlind."

"Okay," I said, keeping my voice steady. "So, just tell me where Blossom is and no hard feelings."

The vampire laughed again. "You are truly delightful," he said. "But no, I'm afraid that won't be possible." The mirth left his face, and his eyes turned predatory. "I haven't eaten in several days, and I'll need my strength to face Jessie. And besides, I'm sure your death will at least hurt him a little. Every bit counts."

"Fine," I said resignedly. "Let's get this over with." I walked up to him, trying to keep my legs from collapsing

beneath me. Lifting my chin, I looked him square in the eyes and said, "How do you usually do this?"

Viktor drew back just a fraction of an inch. I had surprised him with my willingness, and there was a moment where he was considering what to say. That's when I pulled the stake out of my back pocket and jammed it into his flesh.

Chapter 20

Viktor realized what I was doing at the last second. He was able to deflect my blow away from his torso, but the wood plunged into his forearm. The vampire let out an animal-like shriek, his arm shriveling and quickly turning black.

“You bitch!” he snarled, yanking the piece of wood out of his arm.

Before I could think better of it, I grabbed a second stake and lunged at him again, this time hitting him in the shoulder. Viktor crumpled over in pain, and while he was down, I retrieved a third stake from my jeans and aimed for his back, intending to deliver a death blow.

This time, the vampire anticipated me and lashed out, striking me on the side of the head and sending me sprawling. “I am going to kill you,” he hissed, relieving his shoulder of my second stake. He was on his feet again and staggering toward me. “I am going to kill you so slowly and painfully, you are going to beg for death.”

My head was spinning, and I was seeing stars. But Viktor was still intent on my death, and he was standing right over me, so I hitched up my legs and rammed both my feet straight into his giblets as hard as I could.

It didn’t matter who he was—man, vampire, werewolf, whatever—that kind of blow was bound to hurt.

Viktor crumpled over and went down hard. I started crawling as fast as I could away from him and toward the Vanderlind Castle. My head was still ringing, but after a few yards, I was able to get to my feet and stagger. I could hear Viktor coughing on the ground behind me. “Run,” he wheezed. “I love it when they run. But I will find you, and I will suck you dry.”

The world wasn't quite in focus. Double vision was making running very challenging, but I didn't really have a choice. Viktor had gotten to his knees, and pretty soon, he would be after me again. I flung myself on the ground in front of the fake storm drain that led to the castle, jammed my hand between the bars, and flailed around for the latch that would open the grate.

Viktor was on his feet, stumbling in my direction, cradling his injured arm. My fear was turning my fingers into useless chunks of ice. I'd found the latch but couldn't get it to release. "Focus!" I told myself, forcing my hands to stop shaking.

The vampire was only ten yards away. He was standing straighter and no longer favoring his injured arm so much. It had started to heal. He was regenerating. My fingers finally obeyed my brain, and the latch popped. I jerked the door open, scuttled in, and slammed it behind me. Fleeing a vampire by running into a castle full of vampires wasn't the best idea I'd ever had, but I was desperate. Maybe I would be able to lock myself in the dungeon again.

I started army crawling down the tunnel, but I wasn't fast enough. Viktor reached through the bars with his good hand, grabbed me by the ankle, and started dragging me backwards. "Hello, my tender morsel," he said, pressing his face between two of the bars.

With my free foot, I aimed straight for his nose, my blow causing it to gush blood. He jerked back, and I was able to kick his hand and free his hold on me. "You stupid bitch," he said, his voice muffled as he tried to staunch his bloody nose. "You're trapped." He snaked his hand through the bars again to feel for the latch, but I kicked him away. He tried again; I kicked again. I began to feel like a mouse being toyed with by a cat. "You might as well just let me in," the vampire reasoned with me. "I'm going to kill you eventually. You're only making how long I torture you even worse."

“You’re not exactly persuading me to cooperate,” I replied, giving his fingers another kick while trying to inconspicuously hike up my sweater to access another stake.

His injured arm had healed itself completely by then, so Viktor grabbed two of the iron bars and tried to simply tear the door away. While he strained, I readied myself with a stake in each hand. Much to my relief, the grating was too strong. He couldn’t budge it.

“Don’t think I don’t know where this tunnel goes,” he told me. “I could just call the Vanderlinds. They never take kindly to thieves trying to sneak into their castle.”

“Please do,” I said. At least that would get him away from the damn grate.

The next time he reached for the latch, I deployed one of my stakes and stabbed him in the hand, then pinned it there with my feet, ramming the wood deeper into his flesh. The vampire wailed and thrashed, trying to free himself. I had the second stake clenched in my fist, ready for him to lunge his arm through the bars again.

Suddenly, Viktor’s eyes grew wide with surprise, and he was torn away from the storm drain with great force. I couldn’t see what was going on without getting closer to the bars, but I heard a voice command, “Leave her alone!”

It was Jessie. My heart began beating so hard in my chest it was painful.

“What do you care?” Viktor asked in response. “She’s not your companion. She’s just a little plaything you’ve used to amuse yourself.”

“Aurora is mine!” Jessie thundered. “No one touches her but me!”

I heard the blows and the scuffling of a fight. A body was thrown up against the bars of the storm drain. He turned his head, and I saw it was Jessie. “Aurora, get out of here,” he told me. “Go lock yourself in one of the cells if you can.” He got to his feet, disappearing from my view again.

"You already shamed your family over one human," Viktor said. "Why risk your life for another?"

"What are you talking about?" Jessie asked, his breath heavy with exertion.

"Don't think I haven't heard the rumors," Viktor laughed. "Stories like that never go away. Not even after a hundred years."

Jessie was flung against the bars again. I scooted closer to the grate. When he glanced in at me, I held up the stake in my hand and vigorously nodded at him. I saw him draw breath to yell at me for still being there, but then he changed his mind. Struggling to his feet, he said to Viktor, "I judge a being on their actions, not on whether they have fangs."

I positioned myself right up against the grate. I had my head bent low, trying to see the two vampires. When they paused to goad each other, they were visible to me, but then one would lunge for the other or go to strike a blow, and they would appear to be only blurry shadows. My eyes couldn't follow them; they moved so fast.

"You're pathetic," Viktor informed him. "You treat our food better than you do a brother vampire."

"You used to be human once."

Viktor laughed an ugly, demonic laugh. "That was so long ago. Who can even remember."

They started grappling again. It was hard to tell who was who. The moon wasn't helping because it kept slipping behind the clouds, and then I could barely see anything but dark silhouettes. It was amazing how strong they both were, knocking each other several feet with their mighty blows. It was no wonder that my head hurt so bad from Viktor striking me.

One of the dark figures managed to hoist the other man over his head. "Now, Aurora!" I heard Jessie shout. I shoved the piece of wood through the bars of the grate just as Jessie threw Viktor at the opening of the drainage ditch.

My impulse was to jerk back and cringe as the body of Viktor came at me, but I forced myself to stay where I was with the piece of wood in my hands, braced against the iron bars.

Jessie's aim was true, and my makeshift stake was driven deep into Viktor's torso. I knew the vampire was screaming in pain, but I could barely hear him over the sounds of my own shrieks of terror.

I was somehow under the impression that a staked vampire would pop like a blood-filled water balloon. That's how it always happened in the movies. But there was very little blood besides the red stream that poured out of the corner of Viktor's mouth as he gasped and clawed at his chest. He twisted his head to look back at me through the grate. It seemed like he was trying to say something. Maybe he wanted to hurl some horrible last curse at me or beg for forgiveness with his final breath; I couldn't tell. His skin began to shrivel on his skull. His eyeballs dried in their sockets, and his flesh fell off like burned paper. It was horrible, but he was still alive, still moving, his jaws opening and closing. He extended his arms, reaching for me through the bars. I was paralyzed with horror, unable to move, unable to stop screaming, but I desperately, desperately did not want his skeletal hands to touch me.

Jessie came up beside Viktor and thrust him away with his boot. The body fell apart, the joints all unhinged, and then quickly disintegrated to nothing but ashes.

"Aurora," Jessie said, crouching down next to me. "Aurora!" he shouted to snap me out of my hysteria.

I wasn't screaming anymore, I knew that, but I didn't know when I'd stopped. I dropped the stake, held absolutely still for what seemed like an eternity, and then started trembling all over. I was crying, bawling my head off. When Jessie went to unfasten the latch on the grate, I began whimpering, "No, no..."

It wasn't that I was afraid of Jessie. That was not the complete truth. He was terrifying, but I knew he wouldn't hurt me. I just didn't trust that Viktor was truly dead. I had this wild terror that he would somehow reanimate himself and come after me again.

Jessie got the grate open. "Are you all right?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"Yes," I said, my voice trembling. "I think so. Maybe a concussion. I don't know."

"You know I would never hurt you, right?" he said, mistaking my continued fear for terror of him.

"I know," I managed to say with my jaw trembling. "But you're sure he can't come back?" I peered out of the drainage ditch, half expecting the vampire to dive at me from out of the sky. "He's really dead?"

"Yes." Jessie extended a hand toward me to help me out of the little tunnel.

"But he came back before. You killed him before, and he still came back."

"No." Jessie shook his head, his full lips pulled into a tight frown. "We fought before, and I ejected him off Vanderlind land, but I didn't kill him. I should have, but I didn't."

I tentatively reached a hand out and allowed Jessie to help me to my feet. As soon as I was upright, my legs turned to spaghetti, and I fell into his arms, crying. Jessie just held me, stroking my hair, softly whispering, "Aurora. Oh, my darling. I am so sorry."

I don't know how long I cried, but eventually my tears dried, and I was able to stand on my own two feet. "Thank you," I mumbled. "I feel better now." I was embarrassed by how completely I'd lost it, but Viktor was so frightening and his death was so horrible that it had overwhelmed me.

Jessie loosened his grip slightly but didn't release me. "Please don't thank me," he insisted in a hoarse whisper. "It's my fault he came after you."

I was ashamed of myself and unable to meet his eye, but his words were so choked with emotion that I snuck a peek up at him. There was a splash of tears across his prominent cheekbones. I reached up and blotted one with the pad of my thumb, then stuck it in my mouth to see if vampire tears still tasted like salt water. I took comfort in the fact that they did. My gesture somehow upset him, and he closed his eyes so very tightly, hiding his face into my hair. "I couldn't stand it," he whispered. "I couldn't stand it if I lost you again."

I didn't pull away, but he must have felt my body stiffen. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I know you're not Colette." He leaned back to look at my face. "You do look remarkably like her, but I know she's not you. I just," he turned his eyes away. "I just care about you a lot and couldn't stand the thought of something happening to you."

His words made my heart sing. I felt like I'd plunged into a pool of champagne. But I was quickly brought down to earth with the memory that he'd stopped seeing me without explanation. "If you care about me, then why did you disappear without even telling me why?"

"I..." Jessie was surprised by my question. His strong arms were still wrapped around me, and he squeezed me a little closer. "I heard that Viktor was looking for revenge, and I didn't want to put you at risk. I didn't want to alarm you, but I sent Viggo to keep you safe. Didn't he tell you?"

"No. He just said something like, 'Mr. Wanderlind told me to vatch you so I vatch you.' I thought you'd sent him to..." I felt like an idiot to admit it, but forced myself to say, "I thought you sent him to keep me from stalking you or something."

"What?" Jessie was incredulous. It took him a moment to process what I'd just said. Then he smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Viggo's never been good at communicating. I should have told you more in my note, but..." and I swear he started to blush. "I wasn't sure how you felt about me."

I couldn't explain my feelings. I couldn't summon words that made sense. I just knew that there was a part of me that loved Jessie Vanderlind unconditionally. It must have shown in my eyes because his lips found mine and we were kissing. His lips were cool but firm. The pleasure they gave me took my breath away. I was in ecstasy. My whole body quivered with passion.

"Oh, Lettie," he whispered into my mouth.

Chapter 21

We both froze, still in each other's arms but decades apart. He released me, and I took a step backwards, even though my legs still trembled beneath me. "Aurora," I told him.

Remorse was etched across his perfect face. "I hate myself for saying that. I know you're not her. I really do. I'm just so used to being in love with her that it's hard to let go. Even with how I feel about you."

"It's okay," I told him, and on some level it was true. It was never good to have the boy you were in love with say another girl's name, but if my dreams meant anything, I was somehow connected to Colette Gibson. "There's a lot I need to tell you about Aunt Colette and me."

"I'm ready to talk about it whenever you are," Jessie said. "But..."

"What?"

"There are a few things I should do for Viktor now that he's gone. Even though he wanted to kill you, I still need to gather his bones or whatever I can find and make sure he has a proper final sleep."

"Did he have any family?" I gulped. "I mean, you know, a vampire family?" I seriously did not want a whole line of Viktor's relatives coming after me for my stubbornness about not wanting to become a vampire snack.

"He may have some descendents still around, but he wasn't from one of our families or anything, if that's what you mean." Jessie ran his hand through his hair a few times. "Still, the Bishops won't be happy. There's nothing I can do about that. But no, Viktor was always a bit of a loose cannon. He didn't have too many friends."

It was then that I realized that I was a horrible friend. Blossom was probably hogtied somewhere, and I hadn't

even thought of her since I first started fleeing Viktor. I grabbed Jessie by the arm. "We have to find Blossom. Viktor kidnapped her to force me to meet him here. I have no idea where she is."

Jessie patted my hand to reassure me. He lifted his head and sniffed the air. "I don't smell her. There is a dead body nearby, but I don't think it's her."

"What?" I practically shouted. "A dead... You don't think it's her?"

Following his nose, Jessie led me back to the pier. "Stay here," he said, releasing my hand. He disappeared under the pilings.

Without him, I felt vulnerable. The sky had cleared, and the shore of the river was visible under the nearly full moon. Jessie reappeared what must have been only a few minutes later, but it felt like forever. "Who is it?" I asked, begging inside my head for it not to be Blossom.

"A transient," Jessie said. "I don't think Viktor killed him. I think he died of heart failure. He's been there a few days."

"Oh." I felt both relief and compassion. "That's sad." I wondered if there was a way I could inform the police anonymously. It was awful to think about dying like that and having nobody know or care.

"I'll have Viggo report it in the morning," he told me as if reading my mind. "Right now, we need to think about Blossom. You don't have any idea where she is? Where did you last see her?"

"We were at a party at the Tib." I wasn't sure if Jessie knew what the Tib was, but he didn't react either way, so I just kept going. "She hasn't been getting along with her boyfriend, and he said she'd left, but I'm the one that drove her, so I don't know how she would have gone anywhere."

"Have you tried calling her?" Jessie asked.

I shook my head. "Viktor arranged it for somebody to steal my phone."

Jessie shook his head, cursing under his breath. When he was able to speak civilly, he said, "So, she might actually be fine. She might even be home. We can just go to her house and see if she's there."

My stomach was clenched as I thought about the time I spent enthralled in Jessie's arms when I should have been searching for my friend. "Let's hurry," I said, grabbing him by the coat to urge him forward toward my car.

"Where does she live?" he asked, digging in his heels a bit like people do when you try to hurry them. "What's her address?"

"I don't know her address," I told him, tugging on his arm even harder. "She lives on the corner of Oak and Marigold, but don't worry about it. I'll drive."

"Hold on," he said, sweeping me into his arms and then launching into the air.

A small shriek escaped my lips before I could stop it. I was not afraid of heights in terms of standing on top of a tall building or looking out over a cliff, but it was a whole different thing to be flying through the air without an airplane surrounding me. Jessie was grinning from ear to ear as I wrapped around him with both my arms and my legs. "You don't have to worry," he assured me. "I won't let you fall."

It felt like we were at Blossom's door almost instantly. "I'll wait over in the shadows," Jessie said as he set me down on my two feet.

I gave myself a second to regain my composure before climbing the steps to the Costers' porch. Without my phone, I didn't even know what time it was, but the light in Blossom's bedroom was still on, so I rang the doorbell. Making sure my best friend was safe trumped potentially annoying her mom.

I saw someone pull back the curtain a smidge and peek out to see who was outside. It was only common sense not to open the door to any old stranger in the middle of the night.

A moment later, Blossom yanked open the door. "Aurora," she exclaimed. "What's going on?"

"Blossom!" I shouted. "What the hell are you doing here? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Calm down."

"No, I won't calm down," I informed her. "I've been looking for you everywhere. I thought you got attacked or kidnapped or something."

"No." Blossom shrugged sheepishly. "I just broke up with Jimmy and felt like going home."

"You could have told me!" I felt all my fear for her life bubbling over into anger. "I've been in the woods looking for you for hours. I could have been killed, and it would have been all your fault."

"Sorry." She didn't even have the good grace to at least look a little abashed. "I saw you talking to Fred and didn't want to interrupt. I didn't think it was that big of a deal."

"I was running through the woods, screaming for the cops."

"What?" Blossom made a confused face. "Why?"

"Some kid told me he saw some guy grab you. Then someone said the cops were busting the Tib."

"Wait," Blossom interrupted. "The cops busted the Tib?"

"It turned out to be a false report, but everyone scattered, and I couldn't get anyone to help, and then I was running through the woods like a nut job shouting for the cops. All because you didn't want to interrupt me talking to some guy. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Well, not after all that happened," Blossom admitted. "Thanks for trying to save me, anyway. Even if I didn't need it. Sorry if you were freaked."

"Yeah... well... you know, we're best friends." My anger was fizzling out.

"Where's your car?" Blossom asked, scanning the street in front of the house.

"Oh." I turned and looked behind me. "It's around the corner." I waved in a vague direction.

"Why'd you park it there?"

"Uh..." I really didn't have a good answer. "I don't know. I just did." Before she could question me further, I added, "I'd better get going before my mom has a freak-out of her own." I hurried back down the steps. "Goodnight."

I was acting weird. Blossom would have picked up on that. But she probably would just credit it to me being mad at her or something else involving her. She could be surprisingly self-absorbed, but for once, it was to my benefit.

"How'd that go?" Jessie asked, stepping out of the shadows as I headed down the drive.

"She was completely oblivious to any danger whatsoever," I said, walking quickly to get out of eyesight of her house.

"That's good." He fell into step next to me.

"Yeah, she left the party without telling me. I'm both furious and relieved."

"That seems reasonable."

I kept walking, my pace brisk, my fist clenched. It had been a stressful night, and I needed to release some of my anxiety and anger with a little physical exercise. Jesse stayed by my side, not saying anything, just letting me have a moment.

After about six blocks, he asked, "Would you like to keep walking, or should I take you back to your car?"

This made me stop as I considered what he was asking. "Would we fly there?" I asked hesitantly.

"Of course." He grinned, his eyes twinkling. "It's really the only way to travel."

The idea of him sweeping me in his arms and whisking me over the rooftops was enough to wash away all the fear and fury I was feeling. "Okay," I agreed, feeling suddenly shy.

Jessie's smile grew even broader. "Good." He stepped closer. "Now put your arms around me."

I knew I was blushing deeply, but I inched forward a little and lifted my arms to wrap them around his neck. It was so like an embrace that I think I may have inadvertently tipped my head back a little and closed my eyes. The next thing I knew, the earth was falling away from beneath my feet, and the wind was whistling through my hair. It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

At first, I kept my eyes closed and my face pressed into Jessie's chest. After a few moments, his strong arms wrapped around me gave me courage, and I was able to peek out. The sky had cleared, and a smattering of stars decorated the night. The houses and buildings were the size of cars, and the cars were like matchboxes. "We're up so high," I gasped.

"I don't want anyone to see us," was his reply. "And besides," he said, his voice all husky, "I like it when you cling to me."

"I swear I'd still cling to you if we were only ten feet off the ground," I informed him, earning a throaty chuckle for my efforts.

Jessie set me gently down next to my car. I hated to let go of him, but after several seconds, I couldn't make the excuse that I was unsteady on my feet anymore, and I reluctantly unwound my arms from his neck. "You had something you wanted to tell me about Colette?" he said.

I nodded. "I do, but I also really have to get home. I don't want my mom to worry."

"And it's a conversation that will take longer than a couple of minutes?"

"I think so," I told him. "And I probably should show you something I have in my room." If I had my journal in front of me it would help as I tried to untangle the meaning behind my dreams for Jessie.

"Perhaps we should wait until tomorrow night?" Jessie suggested.

I hated to say goodnight, but he was probably right. "Okay," I agreed.

"You're safe to drive?"

I thought about it. I was still pretty shaken up from everything. "Do vampires drive?" I asked, hesitantly.

"Some do," Jessie said with a solemn frown. Then he broke into a grin. "And I happen to be one of them. I love to drive."

I handed him my keys, delighted that the end of our evening had a brief stay of execution. "Do you know how to get there if you're not flying?" I asked in a teasing voice.

He turned his head to the side to scrutinize me out of the corner of his eye. "I think I can figure it out."

Jessie actually walked around to the passenger's side to open the car door for me. That was a first. I've been on dates where I'm lucky if I'm in the car completely before the guy starts driving.

"This car is practically as old as me," Jessie said as he started the VW up.

"It's not that old," I exclaimed, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Just barely," he replied.

We drove along in companionable silence for a few minutes, both of us grinning. I finally broke it with, "How did you know where I was? With Viktor, I mean. How did you find me?"

"Viggo," he said simply. A car passing us in the opposite direction flashed their lights. "What do you think that's all about?" he wondered aloud.

"Most people need their lights on to see when it's dark," I said, reaching over and flipping on the Bug's headlights. "I assume that's not the case with vampires." When he didn't give me a response, I returned to, "So, you were saying about Viggo?"

"I told him to still stick close to you. Even after you called the cops on him." He glanced over at me, giving me a stern look.

I shrugged it off. "If you're going to assign someone to be a bodyguard, you should at least inform the person he is supposed to be guarding."

"Anyway," Jessie said, choosing to ignore my comment, "he caught a glimpse of Viktor slipping through the woods tonight and figured things were about to get ugly."

"Aah." The conversation where the boy told me that a SWAT team was about to descend on the Tib suddenly made sense. Viggo could have easily masqueraded as an entire SWAT team and then some.

About a block from my house, I said, "You'd better pull over here."

Rather than question me or ignore my decision, like a lot of guys would, Jessie pulled quickly over to the curb. Leaving the engine running, he turned to look at me. "What's up?"

"If my mom looks out the window when I pull in, I don't want to have to explain who the guy was driving my car."

Jessie's lips twitched slightly to the side. I couldn't tell if he was suppressing a grin or irritation. "I guess this is goodnight then."

I wanted desperately for us to kiss goodnight, but I wasn't sure if Jessie felt the same way. Our first kiss had been both wonderful and heart wrenching. Still, that didn't mean I wasn't willing to try again. "Goodnight," I whispered, leaning just a fraction of an inch toward him.

Jessie was staring deep into my eyes. It was obvious he knew what I wanted. "Aurora, I..." he stuttered.

"What?"

He cleared his throat. "I haven't eaten in a really long time." With that, he was out of the car. "See you tomorrow night," he whispered before taking wing.

It was disappointing, but understandable. I was all for kissing, but kissing might have led to snacking. Not a good idea. I was a little afraid to get out of the car once my vampire protector was gone. The street was so dark and

quiet. Instead, I awkwardly climbed over the stick shift and then drive the rest of the way home.

"Where the hell have you been?" Mom practically shouted as I walked in the door from the garage. "I was about to call the police."

I immediately walked over and put my arms around her. "I'm sorry," I said, giving her a reassuring squeeze. "I lost my phone, so Blossom and I were retracing our steps trying to find it." I knew she was about to demand that I should have called using Blossom's phone, so I cut her off with, "I would have called you on Blossom's phone, but she forgot it in the charger."

"You could have used a payphone," Mom insisted. "You do know they exist, right?"

"Yeah, but none of them actually work. Or the receiver's missing. Or they're so disgusting you would never want to put it next to your face." I could tell her relief in my being safe was overcoming her anger. "I'm really sorry, Mom. I'll call to cancel my service right now, and I'll pay for a new phone out of my wages. Okay?"

Mom gave me a stern look, but I knew I had covered all the bases pretty well. "Don't be so careless next time."

"I won't. I promise."

She was so worried and mad and relieved that she hadn't looked at me too closely. Between fighting off the vampire, crying hysterically in Jessie's arms, and flying through the air, I knew I was a mess. While it's never a good thing to get clobbered, I was lucky that Viktor had hit me on the side of my head and not on the face because a black eye would have been really hard to conceal. "I'm bushed," I told her, giving her a kiss on the temple. "See you in the morning." With that, I frisked quickly upstairs.

"Goodnight, sweetie."

I couldn't believe it. I was in the clear.

I had a bit of panic as I was getting undressed to take a shower. My Pools of Light was missing. I knew it was a small

loss compared to what I could have lost during my night of terror, but I still felt it quite painfully. It was only after my shower, when I was gathering my clothes off the floor, that I realized it was tangled up in my bra. I snatched up the pendant and covered it with kisses, I felt so relieved.

Once in bed, I couldn't sleep. Again. My head throbbed, and my brain was going a mile a minute. I took some aspirin and, once my mom was in her room, snuck back downstairs for an ice pack. That helped quite a bit and eventually I was able to drift off.

I had the dream again, the terrifying one in the woods where I was running for my life. That was no surprise, given the events of the evening. I was in the woods, running and crying. The creature was after me. I knew that if it found me, it would rip me to shreds. My lungs were burning with each breath. Between the dark and my tears I was practically blind. The heel of my shoe got caught on something, and I pitched forward, sprawling on the ground. I quickly crawled behind a fallen log, losing my shoe in the process. The creature was somewhere nearby. I could hear it sniffing the air. I tried not to move; I tried not to breath; I just tried to stay perfectly still.

Minutes dragged by, and nothing happened. Maybe the creature had left. Maybe it had picked up the scent of some other animal in the dark. Slow, carefully, I inched up to peer over the log.

The woods were very quiet. There weren't the chirps and rustles one usually heard on an early fall stroll. The moon was full, and the clouds that had been darkening the sky drifted away. My tears dried, and I was able to see more clearly. With all the trees and undergrowth, at first I saw nothing. Still, I didn't move. The beast had to be somewhere. I realized there was a large stick quite close at hand, and I tried to gently pick it up for a weapon. I was quiet, very quiet, but it wasn't enough. Something out there in the dark had heard me and turned in my direction.

With a gasp, I realized it was not the beast, but Jessie. I recognized his broad shoulders and commanding stature. He had come looking for me. He didn't know there was a predator on the loose. I had to warn him.

"Jessie!" I shrieked, springing to my feet, ignoring the pain in my ankle. I ran to him, off kilter, with my one shoe still caught in the tree root. "We have to run. There's something out here. Some type of beast."

He came toward me, striding quickly, his arms open wide. I flung myself at him, so relieved and still so terrified. And then he was holding me. Holding me so tightly. "It's okay now," he said, gazing down at me, his handsome eyes shining in the moonlight.

"I love you," I whispered. "I love you so much."

"I know." He smiled, a set of long fangs appearing silver in the moonlight.

I woke up when I started screaming. Just when Jessie's fangs were about to plunge into my flesh.

Chapter 22

The next morning, I told my mom I didn't feel well and even called in sick to Cup of Joe's. My boss got very annoyed when people cancelled at the last minute, but I had been a model employee for at least a year, so he was easier on me than he would have been on a slacker.

I stayed in bed for most of the day, only getting up for the bathroom and snacks. My skull was bruised and tender, but I didn't show any discoloration at my hairline, so that was good. I wrote my dream down in my journal, then regretted it and considered tearing out the pages.

Did Jessie Vanderlind kill my Aunt Lettie?

Jessie was so kind and so brave, fighting Viktor to save me, that it was impossible for me to believe he'd killed someone. Especially someone he still loved so dearly eighty years after what was most likely her death.

A horrible little corner of my brain suggested that maybe that was why he still loved her. Regret.

It just couldn't be true. My heart kept insisting that it wasn't true. But my dream was still pretty vivid in my head. I could almost feel his fangs piercing my flesh. The whole thing had been terrifying, but for some reason I still didn't fear him. He was a vampire, but I trusted him with my life.

I obviously needed my head examined.

By the time nine o'clock that evening rolled around, I really didn't know what to think. I was jumpy and afraid while simultaneously desperate to see Jessie. I'd fixed my hair a new way to cover the purple that had started seeping into my hairline, bruising from Viktor's blow. It was only parting it on the right instead of the left and letting my forelock cover a portion of my forehead, but I wondered if Jessie would notice. My mom told me that boys who really

like you will notice the little details about you. They'll say something when you've changed your hair even slightly. Boys who don't like you, or are just horny and hoping to score, don't notice you. Not the real you. Not the subtle you. They'll notice when you're wearing a tight top, but they won't notice that you changed your toenail polish from pink to silver. There's that expression, *The devil is in the details*, but it's also true of love.

At exactly nine, Jessie came drifting out of the sky like a puff from a dandelion gone to seed, his long coat billowing around him. He landed on the edge of the roof with the velvet paws of a panther, then turned and strode toward me.

"Good evening, Aurora." He smiled as he seated himself near the window, his eyes twinkling. With his next breath, he noted, "You've changed your hair." He reached out and lightly touched a few strands with hesitant fingers.

I felt my face flush with pleasure. All of my reservations melted away. "Just trying something new."

"How are you?" he asked, looking deep into my eyes. "After I left you last night, I began to worry that you might have a concussion. I couldn't sleep thinking about it."

"Do vampires sleep?" I asked. "I mean, the same as you did when you were human?"

"Not exactly," he said. "We close our eyes; we lie very still; we turn off our minds; but it's more like being unconscious than it is being asleep. We don't get to dream."

"Oh." I looked down at the dream journal I had in my lap. "I have a lot of dreams. Some of them pretty vivid," I told him. "And..." it felt awful pushing forward, but I had to, "they've gotten much more intense ever since I met you. Like, weirdly intense."

I knew I sounded like an idiot, but he didn't make fun of me. He just nodded and said, "Okay."

Pushing forward, I extended my journal out the window and said, "This is my dream journal. My dreams have become so strange lately that I started keeping it by my bed

so I can write things down while they're still fresh in my brain." He kept looking at me very intensely, so I kept talking. "I don't know if I'm losing my mind or what, but I think you'd better take a look. I really need your opinion." I extended the notebook out the window, and he accepted it.

After opening the journal and reading a few lines, Jessie said, "Your penmanship is quite good. Very legible. We get mail at the castle all the time that I can't distinguish from chicken scratchings."

"Who sends mail to the castle?" I asked, not revealing the gossip I'd heard at the post office.

Jessie blinked a few times. I could tell he wasn't expecting my question. "Mostly crazy people who should know better," he mumbled. He went immediately back to reading, so I didn't push it. I wanted to focus on figuring out my dreams, not teasing him about his vampire fan club.

When he'd finished reading the entry of my first frightening dream, the first time I was running through the woods, he stopped. Lowering the journal, he said to me in a very serious voice, "Aurora, I want to believe you, but you have to be honest with me, did you write this before or after I told you about Lettie?"

I reached out of the window and squeezed his hand. It trembled slightly beneath my touch. "It's all dated. I dreamed things when I dreamed them."

"But," he struggled to find words that made sense. "That..." he tried again, running his free hand through his hair repeatedly. "This... these are memories. Some of them, at least. These seem like Colette's memories."

"I know. And believe me, it's been freaking me out, too," I assured him. "After you left that night, when you told me about Lettie, I started putting it all together. I was going to tell you right away, but then you stopped seeing me, and I just assumed you were blowing me off. Then there was the whole Viktor thing, so I didn't have a chance to tell you until now."

"This is unbelievable," he marveled, looking at my words and shaking his head slowly back and forth. "It's just... it's unbelievable."

"I know," I agreed. "But if you'd told me a few weeks ago that vampires existed, I would have said that was unbelievable, too."

Jessie was suddenly clutching my hand in both of his. "Is it you, then? I mean, do you feel like Colette? Do you feel like... I don't know, like somehow you used to be her?"

"Not really." I could tell from his expression that he was disappointed, but I had to be honest. "But my grandmother told me that when I was a child, I used to pester her constantly about the castle. And then, when I saw you for the first time, in the library, I felt something. Something very strong. I mean, you're gorgeous so there's that, but this was different. I did really feel connected to you. Still, though," I babbled, "I mean, people claim they feel connected to another person all the time. That's why they came up with that whole soul mates thing, right?"

He nodded. "I guess."

"But you have to keep reading," I told him. I took the notebook and opened it to my dream about the inverted eye. "You remember the night you gave me this?" I indicated the Pools of Light pendant hanging around my neck, "and how I reacted after you had me look into it. Look through it into your eyes, I mean. Well, the night before, I dreamed this." I tapped at the notebook.

Jessie bent his head and quickly read the page. "No wonder you reacted so strangely," he said when he was finished. "I was wondering about that."

"Yeah, I've been wondering about it, too," I admitted. "I mean, you were never outside in the sunshine with Lettie, obviously, but what about the pendant? Was it hers? Or maybe you were planning on giving it to her?"

"No." He shook his head. "She would have loved it, but I actually chose it especially for you."

That little nugget of information was very gratifying, but it didn't explain my dream any better. I unfastened the chain and dangled the bauble off my fingertips. The crystal became infused with moonlight, glowing and swaying gently in my hand. We both sat, staring at the orb, trying to ponder out its mysteries. After a few minutes, I observed, "It's going to be a full moon soon. Almost time for the gloaming."

"The what?" Jessie asked, his eyebrows narrowing in confusion.

"You know." I felt suddenly silly, like I believed in old wives' tales. "The gloaming." He continued to give me a blank look, so I added, "Oh, come on. You must have heard of it. You've lived here forever. It's that weird weather thing we get around here every fall."

"Weird weather thing?"

"You know." I restrained myself from rolling my eyes. "That weird howling noise that happens for a couple of nights this time of year. It's a weather anomaly; that's what everybody always says. It just sounds like someone is wailing for a night or two, and then it goes away. You know what I mean."

Jessie closed his eyes as if trying to process some unpleasant news. "Yeah, I know what you mean. There's a name for it?"

"Sure," I shrugged. "Why shouldn't there be?"

He ran his hand through his hair a few times. "I don't know. I guess I never thought about it." He turned his attention back to the notebook. "Any other dreams I should know about?"

I felt a wave of panic. "No," I said quickly, yanking my journal out of his hands and tossing it across the room onto my bed. I'd decided I really didn't want him to see my latest entry.

Jessie stared at me for a second. "I should go," he said, abruptly getting to his feet.

“Why?” I glanced over at my clock. It was just a few minutes past ten. “It’s not even that late.”

“Because there’s obviously an entry you’re not sure if you want to show me, and I’m trying to give you time to think about it.”

“No, I...” My brain had no excuse at the ready. He saw through me. “Okay, you’re right. I’ll show it to you, even though you’re not going to like it.”

I retrieved my journal from the bed, opened it to my entry from the previous night, and handed it to him. “Thank you,” he murmured, his eyes immediately falling to the words. I felt myself trembling but not with fear. Or to be clear, not fear for my well being. I was desperately worried though that the pages I’d written would hurt him, hurt him deeply. I fought the urge to grab the journal out of his hands and tear the paper to shreds.

When he was finished, Jessie closed the journal and handed it back to me. He was silent, so I stayed silent, giving him time.

“You think I might have killed Colette,” he said, not as a question, just as a statement.

“No.” I shook my head. “That’s impossible. I know how much you loved her. I know how much you still love her.”

“But your dream made you doubt me.”

I wanted to say no. I wanted to insist that I never doubted him. And in my heart, I didn’t. But in my head, I knew there was a chance that he had sucked the life from the person he loved most on the planet, and that was why her loss tormented him so much. Looking at him, being in his presence, I couldn’t believe it to be true. But when I was alone, I had to admit that a small part of me doubted. I couldn’t say anything; I couldn’t find the words. Instead, I hung my head, letting my tears fall onto the window sill.

Glancing up, I saw that he was gone.

Chapter 23

Monday morning, I was in a daze. I just wanted to fold in on myself and get through the day, but people kept greeting me eagerly, kept smiling at me in the hallway. One kid even tried to get me to high five him, which I refused. He shouted, "Don't leave me hanging," but I don't enjoy high fiving even under the best of circumstances.

I was grateful to see Blossom waiting for me at my locker. "What's going on?" I asked in a low voice. "People are being extra weird."

"Oh," she snorted. "That was me. There was a rumor going around that you were a narc or something because you were looking for the cops at the Tib, so I started a rumor that you were actually trying to lead the cops in the wrong direction so everyone else could get away."

Opening my locker, I stuffed in and pulled out assorted books, as needed. Blossom's behavior had me mystified. "Why did you do that?"

She gave me an incredulous look. "I figured you'd rather be a hero than a narc. Although it really is pathetic how easily people will believe anything you tell them at this school."

Someone walked up to us, on the other side of my locker from where Blossom was standing. I could tell by the expression on her face that it was a boy that she considered noteworthy. "See you at lunch," she said, while simultaneously turning and walking away.

"Hi," Fred said as I slammed my locker shut.

"Oh. Hi, Fred," I replied, organizing my books in my arms.

"Are you doing your hair different?" he tilted his head slightly and gave me a little smile.

"Um, yeah." I fought the urge to touch my hair.

"I heard what you did at the Tib. That was really cool of you."

"Yeah, well... I wasn't drinking so I figured... you know." I started heading toward homeroom.

"You were drinking," he said, keeping pace with me. "I gave you two beers. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah..." I'd forgotten about that. "Well, I guess it's a good thing that there weren't any cops. I'd be grounded for life."

I kept walking, and Fred kept dogging my heels. "What are you doing this weekend?" he asked.

"This weekend?" I was a little dumbfounded. Why did he want to know about my weekend? "I don't know. It's Monday. Way too early to start thinking about the weekend." With that, I sailed into homeroom, leaving Fred in the hall.

Fred was tall, good looking, reasonably nice, and not the biggest lunkhead on the planet. He was the kind of guy I should have been pining for in high school. Instead, I was blowing him off because I was hung up on a vampire. I really needed my head examined.

I was so grateful I'd agreed to fill in a shift at Cup of Joe's after school. It was something to keep me occupied. I'd already finished all my homework during my free period and worked on some extra credit.

At nine o'clock, I opened my bedroom window, wondering if I would ever see Jessie again, but he was already there, at the edge of the porch roof, with his legs dangling over the side. "Hello," I said in a hushed voice, and he turned in his seat to look at me. "I'm really glad to see you. I hope you're not still upset about yesterday."

Jessie came closer and settled himself near the window. "Not upset, exactly, but our conversation did force me to do a lot of thinking."

That didn't sound good. I waited for him to go on.

"There's obviously some kind of connection between you and Colette Gibson." He ran his hand through his hair a few

times. "I don't know what it is, and I know you don't feel like her reincarnation or anything, but you can't deny that you have some of her memories. At least in your dreams."

I nodded. He hadn't made an open admission that he'd killed my aunt, but his statement did send a shiver down my spine.

Jessie sighed. "This is so hard. And especially now, this time of year."

"Why now?" I asked.

"This is the time of year when Colette disappeared," he said in a faint voice.

"You mean the day she disappeared?" I asked. "We're coming up on the anniversary? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes and no. I mean... Not exactly. I always think of it as a feeling in the air rather than an exact date. There has to be a full moon. That's one of the things I always remember about that night. That orange hunter's moon hanging in the sky..." He became lost in his memories and stopped speaking for a moment.

"The point is," Jessie said, coming back to the present, "that you are very much like Colette, but also very much your own person. And," he sighed again, "I have to admit I think of you more than I should."

My heart started beating again at a very rapid rate. "I think of you, too. All the time," I admitted.

He looked deep in my eyes. "Do you?" he asked, his eyebrows lifting high on his forehead.

The yearning deep inside me was so strong it was painful. All I could do was nod.

"Thank you for telling me. That means a lot to me. That will help. That really will help." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I need to ask you to do something for me, and it's going to be very hard," he said, his handsome face grave and inscrutable.

My heart was hammering wildly in my chest. "What?" I asked. I knew I was being stupid. He was a vampire. He

could very well ask for my blood, for my life. But that didn't stop me from adding, "I would do anything for you."

Jessie turned his eyes away from me, running his hand quickly through his hair again. And then, drawing in a deep breath, he said, "I need you to try to forget me."

"What?" I blurted, too shocked to take it in.

"I need to stop coming here. I need to stop seeing you. I need you to stop trying to see me. You need to forget me."

"But why?" I choked out, fighting the urge to burst into tears.

"I didn't kill Colette. But on some level, she must have blamed me for her death. Don't you see that? Why else would you have had that dream? She thinks I killed her. She thought I killed her."

"No, she doesn't," I protested. "What about the dream in the daylight? That wasn't her memory. Or maybe it was only a part of her memory that I took and made my own."

"No," he said softly, shaking his head. "I have to end this. I can't take the chance of you getting hurt because of me." He clutched at my hands. "You have to forget me."

"How?" I demanded. "If reincarnation didn't make me forget you, what chance do I have now? We can work this out. We can think of something."

Jessie kept shaking his head, as if he were fighting an internal battle and he had to keep telling himself *no* to stick to his convictions. "If I was a human, things would be different. But..."

"If you were a human, you would be in your nineties," I reminded him.

"Goodbye, my darling Aurora," he whispered, tears glistening in his beautiful eyes. "You've made me happier in these past few weeks than I've been in eighty years." Jessie leaned forward and kissed me softly on the lips. "You must learn to forget me, but I will always cherish your memory."

I closed my eyes when he kissed me and then didn't open them again. Not for a long time. I knew he was leaving, and I

didn't want to see him go.

Epilogue

Two nights later, it was the gloaming. The moon was full; the woodland creatures were quiet; there was just that unearthly moaning that started when the sun went down and lasted until it rose the next day. I had always found the gloaming terrifying as a child. It sounded so very anguished, like a ghost bemoaning a life misspent.

But this time it was worse. Much worse. Because I knew the truth. I knew it wasn't a weather anomaly or the wind blowing through the trees. It was a vampire mourning his lost love. It was Jessie.

All I wanted to do was run to him, to take him in my arms and comfort him. But that would never happen. I would never see Jessie again. I wasn't suicidal. I knew he was a vampire and we couldn't be together, but that was no consolation when it came to how I felt.

I didn't know if I was the reincarnation of Colette Gibson. That was something very difficult for me to wrap my head around. I didn't feel like a reissue. I felt like myself. I felt brand new. But there was no denying there was something between us—Jessie and me. We were connected. I could feel his heart calling to me, and deep within my own heart, I called back.

The End

Thank you for reading *Call of the Vampire*. I hope you've enjoyed the book. If you have, please consider telling a few friends or posting a review. Word of mouth is crucial for authors.

Look for *Heart of the Vampire* ~ Book 2 of the Vanderlind Castle series to launch July 1, 2013. Look for updates, sneak peeks, and all the Vanderlind news at:

GaylaTwist.blogspot.com

You can also find me at:

Twitter: @gaylatwist

Facebook: Gayla Twist

While you're waiting for the return of Aurora and Jessie, take a look at this fabulous sample of *Fangs for Nothing: Vampire Hunting and Other Foolish Endeavors* by my dear friend and good twin, Adrienne Ambrose:

Fangs for Nothing:
Vampire Hunting and Other Foolish Endeavors
By
Adrienne Ambrose

Prologue

“Do you want to see the vampire?” the old man hissed. I was wandering around Chinatown by myself because my friends were lame and wanted to go dancing instead of actually trying to see something of the city. The answer to the old guy’s question was yes; damn straight I wanted to see the vampire. I mean, if there was one available for viewing.

Judging from the thick layer of grime he was sporting, my new friend was more than likely a homeless person. He drew a crude map on the back of a Lone Dragon Restaurant menu some hawker had forced on me earlier and I had yet to throw away. “And take this,” he said, pressing into my hand a dirty, sealed envelope which he had fished out of his crusty overcoat. “Don’t open it till you get there.”

“What is it?” I asked, wishing I had some handy wipes or something. The envelope was a bit sticky and I didn’t want to think about what had made it that way.

“Something you’ll want,” the old dude rasped. He cracked into a jack-o-lantern smile, “Trust me.”

After that, he gave me the usual shakedown for money and I ended up parting with two bucks. If I got to meet an actual vampire, it was a good deal. And even if I didn’t, the old guy looked like he could use the cash.

Following the map, I crossed the street and made a left down an alley. San Francisco’s Chinatown had been crowded with vacationing families pawing through piles of silk fans and faux jade talismans when I first started looking around. After the sun went down the tourists quickly evaporated. Besides the old guy and the customers at a few late night noodle shops, I was pretty much on my own.

Making another left down a smaller, darker alley, I nearly bumped into a young woman leaning against a wall. She

was Caucasian, but wearing one of those snug fitting Chinese silk dresses with the high collar. Burnt red chopstick pierced a dark brown bun of hair piled on the top of her head. Lifting a clove cigarette to her crimson lips, she gave me the eye. "Are you here to see the vampire?" she asked in a gravelly voice.

"Um, yeah."

"I thought so," she said, dropping her cigarette to the pavement and grinding it out with a stiletto clad foot. She grabbed me by the arm, "Come with me."

Up close I could see that she was probably in her early twenties with large dark rings under her eyes that she'd tried to conceal with makeup. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the muffled throb of music from a dance club. Xander and Rini were going to be miserable that they'd chosen to try to sneak into a club instead of hanging out with me. "So this is a real vampire?" I asked as she hurried me along.

"Shhh," she hushed me, pausing to listen. In a voice just above a whisper she asked, "You never met a vampire before?"

"Not exactly."

A grave look crossed her face and she nodded. "Okay." Hiking up her dress she pulled something out of her black lace garter. "You'll probably want to hang on to this."

I was so intrigued by my glimpse of the top of her stocking that I almost didn't grab the thing she thrust at me. "What is it?" I fumbled. It was a long cone shape with a very pointy end. I became acutely aware that Miss China Doll Dress had just handed me a stake.

"Come on," she began pulling on my arm again, hurrying me further down the alley.

At that point I was pretty excited. I was armed, had a hot babe at my side and I had been assured by no less than two San Franciscans that I was about to meet a vampire. The only thing that gave me pause was the stake didn't have the

heft I would have expected. It felt more like balsa wood than an implement strong enough to drive through a vampire's ribcage and into his heart if necessary. Not that I was planning on snuffing a vampire or anything, but it was good to be prepared. China Doll didn't seem too ill at ease so I let her confidence bolster me. It was weird that she was my voluntary guide, but I assumed I was reasonably safe. Unless she was one of the vampire's servants who brought him his dinner each night, choosing from whoever was foolish enough to wander the abandon streets of Chinatown after sunset. That idea made me slightly uncomfortable. She was urging me faster and faster down the darker and darker alley.

"Um," I was starting to feel a little nervous. "You know, my friends would probably really like to meet the vampire too. In fact, they're waiting for me right now. I should probably go get them and then I could meet you back here."

"Here," she said, jerking me to a stop. "We're here." We stood in front of a large wooden door. It looked about a zillion years old and the large windows on either side of it had been bricked over. "Do you have something for me?" China Doll asked. When I gave her a confused look she added, "Something the old man gave you?"

"Oh... yeah," I pulled the sticky envelope out of my jacket pocket.

"Open it," she commanded hammering on the door with three loud strokes.

My hands trembled slightly as I worked at tearing open the envelope. "Hurry," she told me. "What does it say?" The clouds that had been crowding the sky all evening chose that moment to part and the light from the moon shown down on us. As I pulled out a piece of paper and unfolded it, I could hear someone on the other side of the door turning a very rusty lock. "Read it. Read it now."

I squinted, confused, "Two for one drinks until midnight?"

The door flew open. "Welcome to Fangtopia!" a balding Dracula in plastic fangs called out. Before I could get my bearings, I was ushered inside. "Fangtopia is San Francisco's only roving vampire dance club."

"He got two for one drinks," China Doll chirped in a bright voice, instantly more cheerleader than seductress.

"Congratulations," Dracula said as if he was genuinely happy for me. "Now all I need is to see some ID. And there's a twenty dollar cover charge."

I peered into the poorly lit room. About a dozen Goths dressed in black swayed listlessly on the dance floor. Others lounged on battered couches looking bored. The whole place smelled a little too much like sour dough bread. I wouldn't have wanted to go in, even if I had a fake ID.

My vampire host was getting impatient. I could tell he didn't like me sizing up the club. "Come on, kid," he said, clapping his hand on my arm. "You got twenty bucks or what?"

"Suck it, Dracula." I jerked away from him, dropping the stake in the process. It bounced off the dance floor with a hollow fwap, nothing more than spray painted plastic. "I'm out of here."

Chapter 1

“San Francisco sucks!” Xander snarled in an overly loud voice. I mentally willed him to keep it down as I felt the glare of huffy San Franciscans from every corner of the airplane. Unfortunately, he kept talking at the same volume, “I mean, how many posers can you cram into one city?” I glanced over at his black boots, black slacks, black belt, black shirt, enhanced black hair and chipping black fingernail polish and tried not to crack a smile, fully restraining myself from busting his chops. It had been a long trip and Xander was not a fan of irony, especially if it was directed at him. And, after all, it was Xander’s father, Mr. Mega-Lawyer, who was the unwitting sponsor of our trip by always paying off his son’s credit card debt without bothering to check on the purchases.

“For me it was the dog poo,” sniffed Rini from where she nestled in her cozy seat by the window. She always looked a bit like one of those kittens with the flat faces and when she curled herself into a ball, it didn’t help. I was wedged in the middle seat, naturally. Rini went on, “I mean, don’t let your dog crap where you eat, right?” I had to agree with her. Downtown San Francisco seemed reasonably clean in the touristy spots, but we’d stayed at a cheap hotel in the heart of the Mission District. Once you got into the more residential areas, the City by the Bay was oddly smeared with feces. Rini went on, “Did you know that there are five dogs for every child in San Francisco?”

“Really?” I was surprised. “Is that true?” Rini stated emphatically that it was true. I had my doubts. I mean, it felt true, but I also knew that Rini liked to be the authority on everything, even if that meant flat out making things up. The flight attendant started her safety spiel, so I didn’t

shake Rini down for where she'd found such an interesting statistic. I always pay attention to the safety instructions. I look for my nearest exit, even if it is behind me, I double check my seatbelt and I make sure everything around me is in an upright and locked position. It's not like I'm afraid to fly or anything. But I do dread a few aeronautical possibilities, including plummeting to a fiery death, motion sickness, smelly people sitting next to me and the person in front of me fully reclining his or her seat. Besides that, I'm totally cool on a plane.

Xander fired up his iPod and turned up the volume, even though you're not supposed to do that kind of stuff during takeoff. Normally, I'd have said something, but I really just wanted to get home with as little hassle as possible. We were all feeling crabby and discouraged. San Francisco had not quite been the Mecca for vampires that we'd anticipated.

Don't get me wrong, there had been plenty of vampire clubs in the city by the bay. There were also a lot of vampire bars, vampire tours, vampire drycleaners, vampire gift shops and even a vampire tatoria. What there hadn't been were any vampires. Or, at least, none that we could find. There were a ton of people posing as vampires, or as familiars, or even as vampire furies, which I still couldn't quite wrap my head around. Essentially, there had been a lot of people hanging around dressed in black, sipping Bloody Mary cocktails and wearing fake fangs, but we discovered no legitimate presence of the undead.

New Orleans had been pretty much the same deal. The people were nice. There was a real southern southernness that I thought had its charm, but no vampires. I mean, none that made themselves known to us. It was quite the disappointment, but I'm not sure why. It's not like Anne Rice has a direct line to the occult and that's why she located all her stories there, right? At least, I didn't think she did.

My name is Herbert Lehmer. Yeah, I know. I think it was some kind of practical joke my dad played before he decided to kick the bucket.

I like my last name because it's kind of like those fuzzy creatures with the big eyes that hang out on Madagascar. But people are usually too fixated on my first name to pay too much attention to my last. Without fail, the first thing that flies out of people's mouths is, "Oh, like Herbie the Love Bug?" After that they always laugh hysterically and look all pleased, like they've just said this amazingly original joke and have not, in fact, told a lame joke that I've heard two zillion times before. Every once in a blue moon, I hear, "Oh, like Herbert Hoover." That's not too great either, but at least it's a change of pace and shows a sense of history.

Anyway, the whole Herbie the Love Bug thing got so bad that even Xander got sick of it by the time we hit middle school. That's why when we started high school, he started calling me Sherbie, which is short for Sherbet. (Get it? Herbert, Sherbet. Yeah, it's not really all that close, but whatever.) Anyway, it caught on and now I go by Sherbie, which I'm not in love with either, but I guess it's the lesser of two evils. I'm definitely going to change my name when I go to college next year to something cool, like... uh... yeah, I don't know yet, but something at least as cool as Xander, which he swears his parents gave him as a nickname, but I'm pretty sure he ripped off of Buffy.

Xander, Rini and I are vampire hunters. Well, we're not exactly hunting them to stake them or anything like that. We just want to find some. It started out as kind of a joke, actually. We were reading so many vampire novels that we thought it might be fun to actually meet a couple. But where do you go to meet vampires? It's not like you're going to stumble over one at a midnight madness sale at the mall or anything. So at the end of our junior year, we decided we would hit a few of the more obvious vampire hot spots around the U.S. on our summer vacation and see if we could

unearth any (so to speak). I know it sounds kind of nuts, but people get obsessed about all kinds of stuff. What about that first guy who became fixated with summiting Mount Everest? When a reporter asked him why he was so hell bent on getting to the top, he shouted back, "Because it's there!" That's kind of how I felt about vampires. I mean, if they were out there and they actually existed, I wanted to meet one. Maybe not even meet one, but at least see one. Kind of like a celebrity sighting, but where the celebrity possibly wants to kill you. I'm not sure we seriously thought we were ever going to find any vampires, but as long as Xander's dad was willing to keep the funds flowing, it wasn't a bad way to spend a summer.

We were standing at carousel number nine of Cleveland Hopkins waiting for the machine to spit out my luggage. Xander had his army surplus green duffle bag. Rini had her old hard-cover suitcase that she'd spray painted black and stenciled all over with white skulls. Very Emily Le Strange, although Rini denied it. I, of course, was still waiting for my grandmother's flowered roll away case. It was cringe worthy on many levels.

I noticed Xander had subtly adjusted his posture. He slouched slightly to the side, let his head hang, and then looked up through his bangs to gaze at something in the middle distance. Uber James Dean. Xander managed to pull it off as if he was looking at nothing, just having deep thoughts about the far away adventures he would be having if he wasn't stuck waiting for a flowered suitcase at Hopkins International. I casually let my eyes slide across the room. There had to be cute girls somewhere close at hand. Otherwise Xander wouldn't have broken out his middle distance gazing Tyrone Power eyes.

Yep, there they were, off to the left. Three of them. Long hair, short skirts, tank tops, flip flops. They had definitely spotted Xander because they were whispering to each other

and glancing repeatedly in our direction. It's not like they were his type or anything, but he posed for them anyway, not wanting to go unnoticed. As if anyone could avoid noticing him. Xander was tall, lean meat on a big frame. His artificially blackened hair and pale, flawless skin only served to emphasize his electric blue eyes. If he wasn't one of my best friends, I would have absolutely hated the guy.

"Cleveland sucks," Xander snarled, giving just a hint of Elvis lip.

"Huh?" Rini jerked her head up, her concentration broken from the luggage carousel that had briefly hypnotized her while she tried to pry a sesame seed out of her braces. "Wait a minute. I thought you said San Francisco sucked?"

"I never said that. San Francisco's cool. I'll probably move there after college."

Rini didn't catch on that the conversation was being staged for someone else's benefit. "I thought you were going to move to New York to be a writer?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna do that too. I really just want to get out there and live life, you know? Not be tied down."

I saw comprehension filling Rini's eyes. She glanced quickly around the baggage claim and found the girls, who were avidly eavesdropping. "What do you mean, not be tied down?" Rini raised the volume of her voice perceptibly. "I thought you said you were desperately looking for a girlfriend? Someone you could love and pamper and spend every second of your time with." Looking up, she acted like she was seeing the cute girls for the first time. "Hey, there are some cute girls over there! Why don't you go talk to them? Maybe one of them will want to be your girlfriend."

Sometimes I absolutely love Rini.

My luggage came spitting out of the chute at that exact moment and Xander yanked it off the carousel and thrust it at me. "Sherbie, take your damn bag. Let's go." Xander quickly hoisted his duffel onto one of his broad shoulders and half jogged across baggage claim. The girls giggled and

madly tossed their hair as he went past. They reminded me of a flock of startled birds, dithering about, but not really going anywhere. When I walked by, of course, I didn't ruffle a single feather, but I was used to that.

There was actually one girl at baggage claim who looked at me. She was standing with some friends, but they weren't part of the hot mini-skirts or anything. She was more of a washed out elf in jeans that were a size too big. She had dark, stringy hair pulled into a pony tail and she didn't so much check me out as glare at me as if I'd just bumped into her without apologizing. Xander got hot girls tossing their hair; I got unwarranted dirty looks from cranky chicks.

We made our way over to long term parking and piled into Xander's cream colored Dodge Dart. His dad would have bought him any car he wanted, but Xander went for the Dart. Something about the uncoolness of it making it cool. Of course he got the two door, convertible 1969 model, with the significantly smaller back seat, which was where I was usually wedged. I'm a lot taller than Rini, but Xander always insists she gets to sit up front because she's a girl.

Xander took the valley on the way home. I personally find the Cleveland Metroparks a little spooky after the sun goes down, but he insisted they were atmospheric. It was quiet with no one else was around and Xander had the Dart's top down, naturally. At first I was feeling tense about it, imagining the eyes of God knows what staring down at us from the trees. But soon the sultry summer breezes and gentle chirp of crickets lulled me into enjoying the ride.

That was until a bunch of kids in a car careened up behind us with their brights on. I turned around and tried to signal them that they were blinding us, but that just made them drive closer. I swear their bumper was practically touching ours. "What the hell are they doing?" Xander barked, gripping the steering wheel tightly to keep the Dart on the road. "What's their problem?"

"I don't know!" I shouted back, doing my best to wave them off. There were obviously several girls in the car because I could hear them shrieking with the delight of terrorizing us. After catching a few snatches of their words above the cackling, I began to get a bad feeling, like they were waiting until the road drew closer to the river and then they were going to ram us.

Xander stomped on the gas and the other car fell back a few yards. For a brief moment, I thought maybe they had decided to leave us alone, until I heard them rev their engine. They were just giving themselves space to get up to ramming speed. The car came hurtling at us again and I knew they weren't going to stop. We were as good as dead.

Xander wrenched the Dart's wheel abruptly to the left propelling us up a small lane to Wooster Road and we shot out of the Metroparks. The other car wasn't expecting this maneuver, apparently, and they missed the turn. I thought maybe they'd pull a U-turn or something, but I didn't see any headlights, so I guess they kept going, barreling through the valley.

Once we knew we were in the clear, Xander pulled the Dart over to regain his composure. "What the hell?" he slammed his fist into the leather seat. "What the fuck was that? They were they trying to kill us."

"Maybe it was someone you used to date?" Rini suggested as she unclenched herself from the tiny ball she had formed in the passenger's seat.

"No," Xander protested a bit too loudly. "I don't... I mean, I wouldn't... I mean, those chicks were really trying to kill us. And I've never, you know... done anything that warranted killing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Xander said, vehemently.

Rini shrugged, "If you say so."

Xander pulled the Dart up in front of the post WWII bungalow that I shared with my grandmother. Almost every light in the house was on, but that's the way Grandma liked it. She wanted to make it perfectly clear that people were home. She felt it dissuaded robbers, but I think it really only jacked up our electricity bill. Besides, what were they going to steal? The dusty hook rug wall hanging of a pony? The radio Grandma's had since the seventies? I did have a nice collection of vintage jackets that I'd managed to score over the years from my dedication to thrift store shopping, but I doubted thieves cased a house based on the availability of classic menswear.

"I'm thinking L.A. next time," Xander said as Rini got up to release me from the backseat. The top was still down, so I could have just hopped out, but Xander doesn't like it if I stand on the upholstery.

"Why would vampires be living in L.A.?" I wondered aloud as I unfolded myself. "It's sunny all the time there, isn't it?"

"I still say they've got to be somewhere in New York," I heard Rini say as Xander unlocked the trunk and I hauled my suitcase out. "I mean that's where you find all the cool clothes and all the nightlife. If you think about it, it's the only American city that really makes any sense."

"Yeah, whatever," Xander replied. "I'll do some more research, but I'm still feeling L.A."

Rini snickered a little. "I think you want to go there to try and get discovered. Wear a tight sweater and sit at the counter at Schwab's, kind of thing."

"You want to be the next Robert Pattinson," I laughed.

Xander snorted as he hopped back into the car, "I do not. That guy's a poser."

"Why is he a poser?" Rini demanded with a little more force than the comment seemed to warrant. I had my suspicions that Rini was harboring a secret crush on the actor. After all, she'd seen *Twilight* like a zillion times.

"He just is."

“But why?”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” Xander grouched. “I’m tired from crazy chicks trying to run us off the road.”

I crouched down next to the car to talk in a lowered voice, just in case Grandma was in the kitchen and had the window open. “Thanks for the trip, Xander.”

“Yeah, no problem. Remember, Young Lords at the Agora Saturday night.” The Agora show had been sold out for weeks and we didn’t have tickets, but for Xander that was never a problem. Say what you will about him, but the guy was incredibly generous with his dad’s money.

“Okay,” I stood up. “See ya.” Something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. It was a car sneaking up on us with the lights off. It was *the* car. The girls must have somehow followed us. “What the hell?” I blurted.

A girl was hanging out of the open window of the car. She had a black ski mask covering her face. “You’re next,” she pointed at me. I felt something hit my chest. It was a sharp, then dull pain. As I looked down, confused, the car peeled off.

Xander was instantly out of the Dart and by my side. “Are you okay? What’d they throw at you?”

The front of my black vintage blazer was slimy and wet. I had a flash of panic thinking they’d somehow shot me and that my brain hadn’t yet registered the pain of my guts spilling onto the sidewalk. “I don’t know,” I brushed away the goo. The slime felt familiar. “An egg. A bloody egg.”

“What?” Rini got out of the car and Xander bent down to examine my jacket.

“They just egged me, but it’s red.” I viewed my stained hands under the streetlamp. “Gross.”

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Xander straightened himself.

“I’m fine,” I said, feeling more bewildered than anything else. “I hope it doesn’t stain. This is my favorite jacket.”

“Run cold water on it,” Rini advised. “Don’t use hot. That’ll just cook it on there.”

“Okay,” I scrapped off as much of the slime as I could and flicked it on the tree lawn. Bending over, I wiped my palms on the grass.

“Well, if you’re all right, then we’re taking off,” Xander said as he turned to get back in his car. “What do you think she meant by ‘you’re next’?”

Standing up, I grabbed Grandma’s suitcase. “I don’t know. Next to go to the drycleaner.”

I hope you’ve enjoyed this sample of *Fangs for Nothing*. It’s available for immediate download on Amazon Kindle.

Call of the Vampire
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